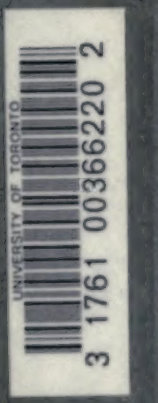
IMPRESSIONS OF HENRY IRVING

BY

WALTER HERRIES POLLOCK


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IMPRESSIONS OF
HENRY IRVING

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GATHERED IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DURING A FRIENDSHIP OF MANY YEARS

BY

WALTER HERRIES POLLOCK

WITH A PREFACE BY

H. B. IRVING

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PREFACE

My friend, Walter Pollock, has asked me to write a few words of introduction to his Impressions of my father. But, in writing about Henry Irving, Mr. Pollock stands in no need of introduction. He was himself a very dear and valued friend of my father; his mother, Lady Pollock, was one of the first to encourage, by the warmth and sincerity of her admiration, the hopes and aspirations of the young actor, who in his earlier years was ever a welcome guest at Sir Frederick Pollock's house. It was natural, therefore, that my father should be inclined to speak more unreservedly than was his habit, of his work, his art, to their son Walter; for he was always quick to respond where he believed he found sympathy, and a sincere appreciation of his aim and endeavour.

An actor's work is in itself so necessarily ephemeral that, to a future generation, it

cannot speak for itself. To leave behind him any record of his ideas, his methods, his purpose in what he did, or tried to do, an actor must either set down such record for himself, or depend upon those intimate with him in his lifetime, to whom he may, in moments of expansion, have confided something of his inner thoughts and feelings, to give a just account of him to posterity. Had my father lived, he had intended to have written his reminiscences, in which, no doubt, he would have given to those who came after him the fruits of his experience, the lessons learned, the ideas formed in the course of a career of strenuous endeavour and singular achievement. But this was not to be. It rests with those who knew him well, who at different times were his companions, to convey to those who neither saw nor heard him, some idea of a personality, the power and impressiveness of which none can question.

I am very sure there are few better qualified, by the ties of friendship and skill of penmanship, to attempt successfully to draw such a picture than Walter Pollock. He knew my father first at that critical time when he had just set his

foot on the ladder of fame; and he saw and talked with him during those succeeding years in which, in the teeth of opposition, less scrupulous and considerate than the successful actor of to-day is called upon to encounter, the "fashionable tragedian" fought his way to full and general recognition. Mr. Pollock writes as a friend; his writing will be none the less interesting and trustworthy for that. No man was ever more loved and regarded by a few good and tried friends than my father. It is well that those of them who will, should tell us something of Henry Irving.

H. B. IRVING.

IMPRESSIONS OF
HENRY IRVING

CHAPTER I

THE first time that I ever met Henry Irving off the stage he had come straight from his dressing-room at the Lyceum, then under the Bateman management, to a restaurant near the Lyceum, where the late Hamilton Aidé and I were awaiting him. Aidé, knowing my admiration of the actor, had, with his usual kindliness, thought that I should know something of the man also by means of a perfectly quiet meeting; and this invitation was the beginning of a great friendship, which lasted without a break or a hitch till the end of Irving's splendid career.

In my mind's eye I can see as vividly as on that occasion I saw it, the entrance of the then rising actor, with the slight, tall, alert figure, and the face, striking alike in repose and when

the mobile features gave expression to successive changes of thought and emotion. On that night, as soon as conversation had well begun, the dominant expression in voice and face was of eager and joyful expectation and hope. He could stay, he said with courteous regret, but a short time, since he had to go back to a night rehearsal of a play in which he hoped and thought he had found a part which might be the way he had always desired to a greater and higher career than he had as yet been able to attempt. He was full of hope, and it was clear that he was devoted heart, soul, and intellect to the venture; but it was equally clear that he did not allow hope and a strong personal conviction to override reason, and that if disappointment came he would be prepared, though very loth, to meet it. But if the speaker did not feel an absolute certainty as to the future result of the new venture, he assuredly inspired his listeners with that certainty; and this was the first impression I ever got of what has often been called—and I do not know that a more tersely descriptive phrase can be found—the magnetic personality of Henry Irving. At that meeting, as always

afterwards, he made and left an enduring and vivid sense of this quality, and of another which is as rare—perhaps rarer still, among artists in general—that of an absolute sincerity in heart, mind, and speech. I should call it rather simplicity, did not that word seem capable of a misleading interpretation. Both qualities exist, but the latter most especially, in another great actor, of another nation, of whom I shall have to speak presently.

The play of which Irving spoke, and to the rehearsal of which he had to betake himself all too soon, was, of course, *The Bells*, the translation rather than version, by Leopold Lewis, of Erckmann-Chatrian's *Le Juif Polonais;* and how Irving's hopes, and his listeners' feeling of assurance, were presently fulfilled is ancient history. I do not know, and cannot guess, how many times I have seen this particular play, but every time that I saw it, up to the protagonist's last appearances as Mathias in London, I found in it one of many instances of a thing which was characteristic of him, and which one may feel sure had not little to do with his never-waning success as an actor. This thing was that he never rested content with what

he had accomplished. He never docketed a part as completed from his own view: on the contrary, he never rested from trying to improve, and again improve, and still always improve on his rendering. In other words, after he had attained, as much as while he was striving to attain, the great position he so long held, he never ceased to be a student, however often, and by however many people, he might be told that he was a scholar and more, a master who had probed scholarship to the utmost. This was markedly the case with his first great success, Mathias in *The Bells;* but here, as elsewhere, the constant process of improvement inevitably involved the rejection or change of certain effects that one was sorry to miss. One such effect I found in the laugh with which Mathias interrupts his son-in-law to be, Christian, the captain of gendarmes, in expounding a theory which shows him to be perilously close on the truth as to the murder of the Jew. The laugh in question broke in upon, one might say was part of, the burgomaster's speech interrupting the gendarme's analysis of the crime. "Take care, Christian, take care! I—I myself had a lime-kiln at the

time!" In the first performances of the play the "take care" seemed wrung from Mathias by the deadly logic of Christian's theory that the Jew's body was consumed in a lime-kiln; while the laugh was far more the result, almost hysterical, of a nervous system strained to breaking-point than of an attempt to cover up the impulse of a startled mind and conscience. The effect was thrilling, as I think all who remember it will acknowledge.

In later representations the whole speech, save for a touch maybe in the two opening words, seemed due to a continued habit of caution and calculation, while the laugh rang hard, dull, mechanical. The latter rendering was undoubtedly the more artistic, as a little reflection on a point to which the actor had doubtless given a great deal will show. For the key to the whole of Mathias's outward life since the murder of the Jew is found in an unremitting preparedness for such a blow as Christian's reasoned reconstitution of the crime, an unceasing repression in all company, even that of his wife alone, of his inward emotions, a watchfulness never relaxed lest by word, look, or action he should betray something

which would lead to his own undoing. Therefore the later interpretation was the right one, though it produced a lesser immediate effect. The change is cited as a good instance, and the first which happened to fall under the writer's observation, of the artistic thought and care which the actor gave continuously to every mood, every phase of emotion, and to the fitting expression of these in any character he undertook, no matter how often he repeated it, or to what extent his audience might suppose that he had given the last touch to it.

The very name of *The Bells* recalls numberless memories of earlier and later friendship with one whom, apart entirely from his art, it was very good to know. One of these memories may be set down now since it gives a proof that Irving was, in the character of manager, not a whit less thoughtful, less careful, of every detail that helped to make the whole of a play than, as an actor, he was of every impression he wished to produce by word, look, gesture, or stillness. It was in his dressing-room, after the end of another play, that several sets of new sledge-bells attached to miniature collars were brought to him. One of them was to be

used in a coming revival of the piece which he had made famous. He had them sounded in succession, with a well-managed indication of the close, distant, and graduated effects, over and over again, while he listened intently before he began to eliminate them one by one until one set was left for final consideration. Then he listened again more carefully than ever to that set, and then he turned to Mr. Loveday, a very accomplished musician, and said, "Now, isn't that the right set?" a question which produced an emphatic "Not a doubt about it." Details of this kind may at first mention seem mere trifles; yet it was the minute attention given to them that produced the then singular homogeneousness that marked all performances given at the Lyceum under Irving's management. People who happened to see the scene on the Brocken, in the late Mr. Wills's *Faust*, from the wing will have noticed and remembered a score or more of such details. But no care on the manager's part would have secured their being worked up into an artistic whole, an agreement in all things which, as Horace has it, was complete, polished, and rounded off without another quality that was

part and parcel of himself. This was that combination of never questioned authority with perfect simplicity and kindliness which inspired rather than compelled obedience, and with it a real affection, in all—actors, supers, and stage-hands alike, who ever worked with or under him.

CHAPTER II

IRVING is referred to in the foregoing chapter as a great actor. Whether the adjective is or is not the proper one to be applied is of course a matter purely of opinion, not of criticism, whereupon argument has nothing to say to the question. But it is probable or certain that many of those who might cavil at the particular epithet will yet think that by reason of what he did, both as actor and manager, to raise the then prevailing tone of dramatic performances, and of the intellect, study, enthusiasm which he brought to bear on every part he undertook, he was in the first rank of players into whose methods it is well worth while to inquire.

No artist—one might say no man—ever rises or begins to rise to the top of any profession or employment amid universal applause; probably there are still plenty of people, who, if they spoke out their inmost opinion, would rank Shakespeare with taste and the musical

glasses. To the upholders of any individual fame or success there will always be a reasoned as well as an unreasoning opposition. This would seem to be an immutable law, without which the world would be a place very different from what it is, and, *ceteris paribus*, a much duller place. The opposition, as above hinted, is not usually very slow in appearing, and certainly it was not long after Irving was on the way to greater ventures in London than playing so-called "character parts" and light comedy, sometimes with a dash of something stronger, to the plaudits of critics, public and private, that some persons of much perception, and many who could not be so described, began to find serious faults in his acting. There were some grave and reverend signiors, with every right that intellect could give to express their opinion, who always maintained that he was no actor; but that again was a matter of pure opinion and not of criticism. Among those who said that he acted, but acted in many ways badly, the chief points of objection might be summarised in the word *mannerism*. This word applies equally to the use of the voice and to the use of the limbs.

To facial expression it can hardly refer unless, indeed, that should degenerate into grimacing, a decadence of which, so far as I know, Irving was never accused by any considerable critic. Of mannerism one knows, so far as record can tell, every actor who has won his way to the highest distinction has been in his time accused; nor is the reason for this very far to seek. In this connection it may not be amiss to begin by quoting certain remarks made by Palgrave Simpson, an authority, if ever there was one, on the whole history of plays, playwrights, and actors, as reported in the late John Coleman's book, "Players and Playwrights." People who knew both men may recognise that if sometimes the manner is Coleman's the matter is Palgrave Simpson's.

"An actor who would make a great name," said the speaker, "ought to be a mannerist. No man has ever been a popular favourite in my time unless he was a pronounced mannerist. Charles Young was a mellifluous mouthing mannerist; Charles Kemble was a silver-toned sententious mannerist; Edmund Kean was a stuttering spasmodic mannerist; Macready and Phelps were always grim and

growling over their bones; Charles Kean had a chronic cold in his head; Keeley was sleek and sleepy; Buckstone was a chuckler and loose in the text; Ben Webster was always imperfect and had a Somerset dialect . . . all these actors owed their popularity to their being more or less pronounced mannerists."

It is not likely that Palgrave Simpson put the last phrase quite so baldly, although, according to Murdoch, a justly famed American actor who played at the Haymarket, Macready was recognised as a player of level and high merit, but nothing beyond that, until he deliberately adopted a mannerism of intonation with what were called "Macready pauses." After that, *teste* Murdoch, he attained greatness. Westland Marston, who had no doubt as to Macready's greatness, described his later method of utterance much as Murdoch did, giving, however, a different explanation of it, and found a special fault in his bearing in moments of repose. Curiously enough this fault was found with an attitude not unusual with Irving, that of standing with one knee bent while the other was rigid. When the grain of salt is added, it will be admitted, probably, that there

is a good deal of truth in these pretensions. To the instances adduced it may be added that John Kemble appears to have been always stately and always asthmatic, while he allowed himself strange pranks in pronunciation, as in the well-known case of *aitches* for *aches* (in *The Tempest*). Further, *The Times* of Friday, January 23, 1807, noticed "Mr. Kemble's revival of" the same play, "only for the sake of protesting against" his "inroads upon the territories of English orthoëpy," while admitting his "appropriate dignity" as Prospero. Recording by the way that he was "hissed every night" for odd tricks of utterance, it was itself inclined to good-humoured merriment, but found indignation stealing in at Prospero's call upon his *sarevant* Ariel. The great paper dwelt distressfully on his habitual misuse of vowels and of consonants, and on his "excess of distinctness." The brief notice ended thus: "But we are totally at a loss to account for the two other monstrosities besides *Caliban* which were apparent on Wednesday night, the *perfijjus* and the *varetshu* for *perfidious* and *virtue*; and we accordingly throw down our pen *in despair*." The italics on the final

words surely strike a note of grievous hopelessness.

To go further back, one is to suppose that Quin's elocution in blank verse was of the most correct and most rotund kind, with, as Mr. Barton Baker says, a "sing-song delivery undoubtedly borrowed from the Parisian stage, where it was the mode during the time of Louis XV.," while his action was of what has been termed the tea-pot order; in fact, that his method in blank-verse tragedy was a sublimation of that which was wont, within present memory, to be taught to and learnt by public school boys who figured before an audience on speech days. Of the heretic who, greatly daring, completely overturned Quin's traditions, David Garrick, there is a sort of general idea that he could fly with equal success at any game in comedy or tragedy, and that he had no mannerisms to speak of. On neither point was this in truth the opinion of contemporary critics. Here is a letter, obviously unbiassed, addressed to him by an anonymous correspondent at Dublin in August 1742.

"The first thing I shall mention (and which I insist upon that you reform) is your false

pronunciation of several words, which can be owing to nothing but custom and prejudice in a man of sense, as I am sure you are. The words that I chiefly remember are these: matron, Israel, villain, appal, Horatio, wind; which you pronounced metron, Iserel, villin, appeal, Horetio, and the word *wind* you pronounced short. I cannot imagine what your objection can be to the letter *a*, that you should change it into an *e*, both in the English language and the Latin; or what fault you can find with the English word *matron* that you should be obliged to make it Greek. Does not *Horatio* sound much better than the little word *Horetio?* It is said that Horatius Cocles, when he could no longer withstand the fury of his enemies, leaped into the Tiber. But what did he this for? Was it not for a name? Yes, surely, but never for the name of *Horetius.*"

Other faults were found with Garrick's acting and elocution. In private life conversation Garrick was given to the same kind of inarticulate interjection that in a later generation belonged to Macready, and, moreover, to a slight stutter at the beginning of a phrase. As time went on some touch of both these

tricks found its way into his stage representations. He was always sensitive as to caricatures of his acting, and it is reported that he was specially annoyed by Foote's taking off his dying scene in the part of Lothario, whereof the mimic thus rendered the concluding words: "Adorns my tale, and che-che-che-che-che-cheers my heart in dy-dy-dy-dying."

It would be easy to multiply instances of admittedly great actors, English and foreign, who have been full enough of mannerisms. But enough has been said to show at least, if any should hesitate to go quite so far as did Palgrave Simpson and Murdoch, that mannerisms have certainly never impeded an actor's reaching the height that followers of any art are fain to reach.

CHAPTER III

BEFORE the decisive day of *The Bells* I had seen Irving as Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist* at the Queen's Theatre, with Toole as the Artful Dodger, the always charming Nelly Moore as Nancy, and John Clayton (a notable performance) as Monks; and as Digby Grant in *Two Roses* at the Vaudeville with the excellent cast which many playgoers will still remember. On both these occasions I was still an undergraduate, but old enough as a playgoer to have a vivid recollection of the extraordinary intensity which "little Robson" possessed (or which possessed him) in flashes which he could not, or believed he could not, sustain through a whole part. This intensity was brought to my recollection by passages in Irving's Bill Sikes, which, moreover, was an absolutely life-like and consistent character throughout. Years afterwards, and after he had completely won his spurs as a tragedian in *Hamlet*, I asked him where, if anywhere, he

had found a model for this striking rendition. He replied, "I got at it by quietly observing certain street corners I know of where fellows of that kind congregate." As he spoke, standing up, he became for the moment one of those fellows, hang-dog, suspicious, truculent, with an air that indicated a desperate daring if he were brought to bay. More than that, in that brief transformation he somehow made one see not only the man himself, but all his surroundings, the minatory tavern corner, and the group of equally cunning but less daring companions hanging on the words and movements of the central figure. Those who have seen John Parry will remember how in the light and charming entertainments where the imagined Mrs. Roseleaf was the chief personage, he exhibited the same power, with a difference, of calling up a whole scene with a word, a look, a gesture. The inquiry and prompt answer as to Bill Sikes led to my asking Irving about his performance of Bob Gassitt (in *Dearer than Life*) which I had never seen, but of which I had heard a great deal. "I think," he said, with the air of absolutely unaffected diffidence, which appeared at times all through

my long intimacy with him, "I can give you some idea of that." In a moment he was sitting on a table, swinging his legs and folding his arms with a sort of hesitating impudence, as he spoke one line of the part, "You might give a fellow a chance, Lucy," and, as I knew the general run of the play though I had not seen it, I saw not only Bob Gassitt in place of Henry Irving, but also the whole surroundings in the illuminating delivery of those few words.

The vivid performance of Bill Sikes did not engage popular attention to anything like the same extent as did the subsequent interpretation of Digby Grant, though in both there was to be noted the same sure unfaltering touch of true art whereby the horror inspired by the confessed ruffian was never thrust beyond endurable limits, while the selfish vanity and unbridled meanness of the adventurer Grant becoming a beggar on horseback were never suffered to pass the just limits of real comedy as indicated in the "Essays of Elia." The audience was intensely amused, but so far from being disgusted with the character's base qualities that whenever he left the stage there was a wish to see him re-enter. And so, to

pass to a very different line of character, was it with Mathias in *The Bells*. It was Irving's keen perception and insight that raised *Le Juif Polonais* (written originally by MM. Erckmann-Chatrian with no view to stage production) from a sordid to a soul-stirring episode of Alsatian village life. In making such a change he set himself deliberately a very difficult task, wherein he so acquitted himself that repulsion at the murderer of years gone by was overmastered by pity for the man full of such honours as village life can give, but worn down and out by incessant remorse far more than by fear of detection.

The only characters other than those mentioned in which I saw Irving before *The Bells* were Jingle in a version of *Pickwick* and Landry (Landry Barbeau was the full name) in *Fanchette*, a stage version of *La Petite Fadette*. In the last-named character he had nothing to do in a part out of his line and did that nothing well, and his Jingle, from the first to the last (in another version that he played), was a most vivacious performance, but, to my thinking, not to be compared with his Jeremy Diddler in *Raising the Wind*. Possibly he felt

a lesser freedom in dealing with a character created by Dickens than he did when dashing through the irresponsible humours of a part sketched with boisterous spirit by Kenny.

Both Bill Sikes and Digby Grant, with which latter began, I think, the afterwards widespread fashion of Irving imitations, were distinctly what are called character parts. The phrase was not to begin with a very happy one, since all good acting is acting of character, but it has acquired a definite meaning and is undeniably convenient. This being so, the mention of these two parts leads naturally to a question which goes almost hand in hand with that of mannerism, that is, how far should an actor endeavour to sink his own personality in that of the personage he is representing? If one reduces it to its simplest form, that of assumption so complete that the disguise cannot be penetrated, then surely it is an accomplishment for the entertainer or quick-change performer, who shows the superficial aspects of a character for a few minutes, and not for the actor who has to sustain a part of varying moods and feelings throughout a play or the greater part of it. There are, of course,

instances where an actor's disguise is rightly so complete that for a minute or so the audience may be puzzled as to his identity. Such was the case with Charles Fechter when, as Lagardère in *The Duke's Motto*, he assumed the personality of the hunchback, and with Mr. Tree when he played the wily Minister of Police in *The Red Lamp*. But what could there be of nature or art in an attempt, successful or not, to keep up the first moments' illusion throughout the course of the play? The actor would have to concentrate all his thought and energy on that one point, so that his performance would at best be that of a skilfully handled marionette. Yet how often does one hear it said, unthinkingly, in depreciation of this or that distinguished actor, "Oh! very clever, of course, very clever indeed, but then you know he's always Mr. X." Well, what else should he be, showing you in his own fashion, inimitable save as to surface qualities, the "true inwardness" of Colonel Y or King Z in his habit as he lived. The people who make these remarks are not noted to observe of a first-rate painter's pictures, "An admirable painting, but you can see it's by

N. N." Yet this implied reproof would be just as sensible as the other. The true aspect of the matter is surely to be found in the terse French phrase of an actor who has "got into the skin" of the personage he represents. Just so, indeed, and when the actor himself feels that he has accomplished this, then he calls up and employs every resource of his art, including the mysteries of make-up, to show his audiences a living, thinking, feeling image of the personage as he conceives it. If he fails to do this his art is at fault; if he succeeds then we have a fine piece of acting. But as for completely and absolutely sinking his own identity, why, what should we make of the skin without the particular man, the particularly accomplished actor, who has got inside it? As well might one expect a watch to work without a mainspring. Two excellent instances of what the actor's art can and should do in this matter of assumed personality are easily found in Sir John Hare's Lord Kilclare in *A Quiet Rubber*—Coghlan's clever version of *Une Partie de Piquet*—and in Sir Henry Irving's Corporal Brewster in Sir A. Conan Doyle's *Story of Waterloo*. In each case the assumption of a

marked and peculiar personality, to say nothing of the assumption of old age, was complete. The intonation, the walk, the manner, the tricks of gesture were in each case absolutely foreign to those usually associated with the actor, and absolutely proper to the character represented. Yet who that had ever seen either actor before could have doubted, supposing he had neither friend nor playbill to inform him, that he was seeing a performance in the one case by Hare, in the other by Irving?

As to this matter of impersonation Irving gave a notable illustration of it when he played the two parts of Lesurques, the wrongfully accused hero, and of Dubosc, the forceful villain who leads and imposes his will upon a band of robbers and cut-throats, in *The Lyons Mail.* There is a little history worth noting about the title, *The Lyons Mail.* Charles Reade's version of *Le Courrier de Lyon* was called, like other and inferior versions, *The Courier of Lyons,* which is absolute nonsense, as there is not a word or a hint about a *courier* in the whole of the play. Nor, of course, is the English *courier* in any sense a translation or rendering of the

French *courrier*. Reade, however, was ignorant of French in his youth, and never acquired a real knowledge of it. Wherefore, like another adapter, who translated *feu d'artifice* by *artificial fire* and *il n'y voit que du feu* by *his eyes shine like a demon's*, he slapped down *The Courier of Lyons* as the English title of the play. And to the play this impossible title stuck until Mr. John Willis Clark, who to much distinction in other fields of knowledge adds that of being an accomplished French scholar, wrote in 1870 a special and excellent version of the French piece for the Cambridge A.D.C. To this he naturally gave for the first time the only proper title, *The Lyons Mail*. A friend of Mr. Clark and of Irving drew the actor's attention to this matter, and in consequence the play became known, and will continue to be known to the British public by its right name, in the first instance given to it by Mr. J. W. Clark. Irving's Lesurques was such a representation as a first-rate actor would give of a thoroughly pleasant unaffected gentleman of the time plunged suddenly, by no fault of his own, into a very sea of troubles. His Dubosc was an absolute impersonation, and

something more than that; from his first entry to his final disappearance the threatening figure of the swaggering successful ruffian struck a note of terror and yet commanded a kind of admiration for the dare-devil's never-failing resource and courage. To me there was, from the purely, perhaps ultra, artistic point of view, one fault in the double undertaking. That was, that in being bent on differentiating the two men the actor ended by making them, in truth, too little alike for the needs of the story. There was, of course, a strong resemblance in the outline of the face and one less marked in the general aspect of the figure. But the gait, the gestures, the intonation, the whole behaviour of Dubosc were so totally opposed to anything in Lesurques that it was impossible to understand how any members of Dubosc's gang could really and seriously imagine, as the play makes them do, that Lesurques was, in fact, Dubosc in another dress. This I pointed out to Irving as I was accustomed to tell him exactly how things struck me in his own acting or in his stage-management. I think he agreed with me in theory, but he stuck to his guns in practice.

And, apart from the fact that he certainly revelled in what was a remarkable *tour de force*, I have little doubt that he was right from the point of view of effect upon his audiences.

CHAPTER IV

To say that any first-rate actor could play Lesurques thoroughly well is not, of course, to ignore that Irving gave to the part many touches of his own peculiar genius, and these were specially noticeable in the scene of farewell to the girl he was to marry, and in the gradually approached outburst of bewilderment and horror when Lesurques finds himself accused of robbery and murder with, as the final and blasting touch, his own father bearing witness against him. In connection with this scene there was on one occasion an incident illustrating in an odd way the actor's constant attention to every detail of a play. I was sitting in a box close to the stage with my two nearest friends, also great friends of his, and, after the fall of the curtain, we were astonished by a noise and what seemed a strange commotion just behind the curtain, and by hearing Irving's voice reiterating at a high pitch, with short intermissions, "It's monstrous, it's monstrous!"

When I saw him at the end of the play I asked him what this might portend. He gave the smile which often lit up his face and said, "You forgot, though you had only just heard them, that those words are in my part when the old man denounces me. I was not quite satisfied with Mead's attitude and gesture at that point, and so we went at it hammer and tongs the moment the curtain was down until we got it right for to-morrow night." Many playgoers will remember the always excellent acting of Mead, to whose Richelieu Irving, when a beginner, had played François.

If the scene just mentioned was the most striking because it offered at once the greatest scope and the greatest difficulties in Irving's Lesurques, for the same reason the capital scene in his Dubosc was the concluding one of drunken triumph ending in final discomfiture. It was not upon amateurs only that it produced a thrilling effect. Once I witnessed the play with Mounet-Sully, the great French tragedian, as my sole companion. All through the play he was full of admiration for the stage-management, for the general excellence of the representation, and for the protagonist. During

this scene he never relaxed an intent gaze upon the stage, and whenever there was a moment's pause in the dialogue he exclaimed far more to himself than to me, "C'est étonnant, c'est étonnant!"—words that spoke for themselves without the elaboration he afterwards gave to them. And this I know was a spontaneous tribute to his brother-actor's art and power, entirely apart from the warm friendship and complete understanding which existed between the two men despite the fact that neither could speak the other's language beyond a few words of greeting, farewell, and here and there some word in constant use which gave a help to their mutual comprehension. I fancy in each case it was absorption in dramatic art that had been a bar to linguistic attainment. Mounet has an ear so fine and a tongue so responsive to the ear, that on one occasion when, as he was thinking of a few days' travel in the South of England, he learnt some dozen short complete English phrases (from R. L. Stevenson and myself) to help him through, after twice hearing them repeated he spoke them literally, with the generally puzzling *th*, like an Englishman to the manner born. I

imagine Irving could have done the same with French phrases, for he, too, had a singularly correct ear, and, moreover, like some, though by no means all, great actors, was when he chose a perfect mimic. There was another more important likeness between the two men, which no one who saw them together could fail to note. This was a complete similarity, to which allusion has been made before, in singleness of purpose and in absolute sincerity of heart and mind. This no doubt it was that, along with abounding sympathy in all art matters and a keen sense of humour on both sides, made their curious but hardly halting converse not only possible but extremely interesting and diverting both to themselves and to any fortunate "assistants." I took Mounet-Sully with me once to the Lyceum Henry VIII., when he was delighted with the whole representation, and specially perhaps with Irving's touch of complete art in silent by-play. We went afterwards to Irving's dressing-room where, after one of the curious conversations indicated, the English actor presented the French player with one of Wolsey's *birettas*. It was accepted with a simple boyish

delight, and when I went back with Mounet to the Hôtel Dieudonné (then a little island of old-fashioned Paris in the midst of St. James's), nothing would serve him but clapping on the cap and seeing its effect from various points of view in a wall-mirror. I was moved to laughter, which, as I had of course to explain to my host, was due entirely to the reflection that he was doing precisely what, if the situation had been reversed, Irving would have done.

Here it may be said emphatically that in the course of countless intimate talks extending over many years, Irving always showed a full and generous appreciation of other actors, English and foreign, though he had plenty of the critical faculty—and indeed without it how could he have been so excellent a stage-manager?—which he was as ready to apply to himself as to others. An instance of this self-criticism may perhaps be given.

When he had decided, after considerable hesitation, to produce *Romeo and Juliet*, he had further and deeper misgivings as to whether he should himself play Romeo or Mercutio, and his final decision was mainly due to a feeling, probably correct, that the public would

expect to see him as Romeo. His rendering of the part was not one to which as a whole any honest critic could give unqualified approval, although in some scenes, particularly those with the Friar and with the Apothecary, he played up to his best mark. That he was among the critics who did not think well of the whole performance will now be seen.

After he had made up his mind he came one evening to see my wife, myself, and my late brother-in-law, Captain Pipon, R.N., who was staying with us. After some talk to which the foregoing observations are due, he sat down to read to us many of the scenes in which Romeo appears. He read at half-tone, yet gave its full force and meaning to every character, and it was evident throughout that his conception of the part of Romeo was instinct with beauty and truth. He indicated fully all the passion, all the moods, all the impulse, and all the weakness of the character, and, in a subtle fashion, brought all the movement and life of the various scenes before one's mind's eye. I doubt if he ever had a more rapt audience, and certainly not the least rapt of the three was the sailor, who was a very keen student

of Shakespeare. When the glamour of the reading had come all too soon to an end the reader put down his book, looked round at us, and said with a half-humorous sigh: "There, that is what I *want* to make of Romeo. Unluckily I know that on the stage I cannot come anywhere near it." He waved away all attempts at protest and repeated, "No, no. I know I can't do it. How I wish I could! But I must do the best I can." When he had gone back to his rooms Captain Pipon expressed the feeling of all three hearers in the words, "If only he could play Romeo as he read it he would set the town ablaze. But what a Mercutio he would make!" And on this point I fully think that Irving would have been in complete agreement. And surely his Mercutio, had he played the part, would have been a very feather in his cap, and would have divided posthumous fame with the Mercutio of Charles Kemble. One may guess from his Benedick with what enjoyment and with what success he would have shown us the gaiety, the courage, the ready wit of Romeo's friend. Doubtless he would, with Charles Kemble, have thrown over the tradition, whence derived one

may ask vainly, of delivering the Queen Mab speech as "a set piece" flung in the faces of the audience by an actor taking the centre of the stage, well down to the footlights, and would have shown us the gallant imaginative Mercutio started on a train of ever fantastic thought by a chance suggestion, and, so started, finding one witching idea succeed naturally to another until, all unconsciously to himself, one entire and perfect fabric of exquisite gossamer had been woven.

Among actors of Irving's own time Charles Coghlan took this view, and did with it all that the highest talent can do. One may imagine, without for a moment depreciating the charm and bravery of Coghlan's performance, that Irving, taking the same and the only right line, would have infused certain subtle touches, and lent to the whole part the unique illumination due to a quality which even the highest talent does not quite reach.

To return for a brief space to the question of criticism mentioned above. It has been said, with a strange perversion, that Irving resented, or at any rate grew to resent, criticism from friends. To me it is difficult to imagine any-

thing more removed from fact. Up to the last moment of his career on the London stage he was more than willing to listen to any suggestion concerning either his own acting or the general conduct of any performance under his direction. There must be many friends by whom this trait in him will be remembered, and it is probable that, as one writes of his productions and acting, instances of it only too crowding will recur to the memory. For the present, at least, one may suffice. It was during a "long run" revival of *Hamlet* that he suddenly adopted the reading in the burial scene, "the cat will mew, the dog will have his *bay*," instead of "his day." This reading has always struck me as on a par with the famed suggestion that "the child is father to the man" should be changed to "the man is father to the child." This contention I presented to Irving, in his own frequent tone of affectionate banter, in more than one way. He said little; indeed, I think he only used a habitual and non-committal phrase—"Ah! you think that, do you?"—but a few nights later I found that he had gone back to his original reading. I do not doubt that he had had re-

monstrances other than mine, the which combined, if he had in truth resented criticism, would only have made him cling more closely than ever to his new departure.

It seems probable that he first took to the *baying* dog from sheer desire to break, however little, the monotony of constant repetition. For during this, or a similar, long run of *Hamlet*, I was with him in his dressing-room just before this burial scene, and noted with surprise that a scarlet feather was being placed in his black hat. To my natural inquiry he answered: "Well, you know very likely that there's reason for supposing that scarlet was in old days the mourning colour of Denmark. But that's not really it—no. The truth is—anything for a change, however little, in these long runs."

The thing is trivial in itself, but what a comment on the inevitable effect of long runs—once, and only once, the reiteration night after night made him for a moment lose his "words"—and what an illustration of the difficulties besetting an actor-manager, who, as an artist, cannot but loathe the continuous repetition of a passionate play and part which, in his managerial capacity, he is compelled to foster!

CHAPTER V

THE mention of the scarlet feather used for a brief time in *Hamlet* naturally reminds one of another play and part where such a feather was a constant feature. This was Wills's version or adaptation of Goethe's first part of *Faust*, given with the unrivalled performances of Miss Ellen Terry as Gretchen and of Irving as Mephistopheles, with a "cast" at all times chosen with anxious exercise of care and judgment, with stage-mounting and stage-management (in carrying out this Mr. Loveday was indefatigable) that could scarce be over-praised.

It would be something more than superfluous to go into criticism of Wills's extremely effective play, but one fault, as many good judges thought it, may be mentioned, as in connection with it there was an instance of a quality which was among Irving's distinguishing characteristics. The passage in question was that wherein Faust announced to Mephistopheles his intention of marrying Gretchen. Thereon Mephistopheles,

after a cold menacing delivery of the words, "That is your intention?" dropped completely the mask of cynical humorous banter, became a fiend unbridled and storming, and let loose upon Faust a flood of vituperation containing threats of the direst physical torment and annihilation. The momentary impression of the change, aided by those effects of light which the manager thoroughly understood, was startling enough; but a very little consideration was needed to show its complete incongruity with the positions of Faust and Mephistopheles as conceived by Goethe and adopted throughout the rest of the play by Wills. In a play avowedly following Goethe's ideas, and in many passages well translated from the German, one is bound to regard Mephistopheles as identical with Lucifer, and as "the prince of darkness is a gentleman," it is quite out of the question that he should resort to vulgar threats not unlike those put into the mouth of the fiend absurdly called Lucifer by M. G. Lewis at the end of "The Monk." This is surely enough, without the further consideration that the Mephistopheles of Goethe, and, save for this passage, of Wills, would never have flouted all

the rules of the game by going so grossly outside and against his agreement with Faust. I believe that Wills founded the scene on some idea found in some version of the Faustus legend, though where it is not easy to imagine, since, of course, there is no hint of it in the German puppet plays. These, which may have come originally from England, served as a point of departure for Goethe, to whose genius the Gretchen episode, which became for theatre purposes the play, is entirely due. However the scene came into Wills's scheme, he no doubt was captivated, as was Irving, by its mere theatrical effectiveness, and so it was thrust into the midst of circumstances with which it was wholly at variance. But now for the matter which has specially fixed its incongruity in my memory.

When *Faust* had been played at the Lyceum often enough to leave no doubt as to its success Irving came to supper with us, the only other guest being his dog Fuss. There was naturally a good deal of talk about the piece, and presently, as was his wont, he invited views and criticism. One or two suggestions as to details were put forward and considered, and then

arose the question of this scene with its sudden and unexpected appearance of a teeth-and-claws fiend. I gave my opinion, doubtless too strongly, for I ought to have known very well that as the thing had made a decided mark with the audience there it would stay.

Never, certainly, was an objection more rashly and disastrously hazarded. Irving raised his eyebrows, smiled a trifle bitterly, and "That," he said, in tones of the sardonic humour, which appeared rarely in private life, though it served him admirably in Mephistopheles and some other parts, "that was *not* your opinion when I gave you a sketch of the scene in my dressing-room some time before the play came out." In a flash the whole thing came back to me. It was absolutely true. He had given an outline of the scene, about which he was enthusiastic, and I had echoed his approval. I was so confounded that I could only murmur the faintest adumbration of what I immediately saw was my only excuse, that I had been completely infected by his enthusiasm and borne out of the realm of judgment by the fiery impetus of his own convictions, as by the dramatic power and

reality that he infused into his brief description, though it was given under his breath. It was a striking instance of the "magnetic personality" which enabled him, as was said of another man of singular fascination, Laurence Oliphant, "to wile the bird off the tree" by the force and attraction of his individuality.

Two other vivid memories of *Faust* may be cited as bearing, in different ways, on the question raised by Diderot in *Le Paradoxe sur le Comédien*. Irving's own opinion on the matter was more than once expressed in print, and might be baldly summed up in the theory, surely sound, that a true actor must have in all the business of the stage "a double consciousness." His practice completely bore out this theory.

On one occasion I was sitting in the audience during the scene in the Witch's Kitchen. The action was just nearing the point where the Witch, failing to recognise Mephistopheles, turns and rends him as an intruding malapert, whereto he gives a fantastical retort. Something had distracted my attention from the stage (I had seen the play a good many times), and when I looked again Mephistopheles was

gabbling some partly intelligible jargon at top speed, and laying much more stoutly than usual about him with a whisk to overturn and shatter the crockery on the shelf above the couch on which he half reclined. Meanwhile the Witch stood aghast and astounded, as well she might. I was puzzled because I had just missed the clue to this unaccustomed departure, which was accepted by the larger part of the audience as a diverting and intentional incident in the scene. What had happened was this. Mead was playing the Witch with his usual excellence. But his memory failed him, as now and then it would do, after he had burst through the cloud of lurid smoke; and he stood literally struck dumb for the moment. Irving took in the situation at a glance, and spoke as quickly as he could all the words he could remember of the Witch's speech, filling it in with nonsense phrases and giving to the jumble a tone as of one who could read the Witch's thoughts. Here was an instance of the "double consciousness" employed by the actor, who, never forgetting the character he impersonates, is yet at all moments ready to cover up and repair any mishap or mistake in the stage

business by which he is surrounded. A precisely similar incident took place in *The Lyons Mail*, when the player of Lesurques's father, appearing while the robbery, with murder, of the mail is in full blast, forgot to utter the fateful words addressed to Dubosc, "My son!" Quick as thought Irving improvised the words, "I am not your son!" thus implying those which ought to have been spoken, and almost simultaneously with the utterance fired the pistol which wounds the old man. The rapidity and the noise of the whole thing was more than enough to prevent general perception that anything had been slurred or omitted, or that the improvised words were in fact sheer nonsense, since Dubosc was entirely ignorant that his double or his double's father had any existence.

Another instance from *Faust* is somewhat different in kind. This was noted in the scene of the sword fight between Faust and Valentine, with Mephistopheles at the back giving, beyond the knowledge of Valentine, the aid of his sword to Faust's. The scene was most carefully got up, and was in its way a special feature in the whole performance. The swords

when crossed flashed fire, not the "shower of sparks" defined and approved by Mr. Vincent Crummles, but an eerie, lambent, blue flame due to ingenious electrical apparatus. This involved the wearing of special non-conducting gloves by Faust and Valentine. On this occasion the player who was undertaking the part of Valentine at very short notice had, not unnaturally in the circumstances, forgotten when he was called for the stage to put on his glove. Consequently at the first crossing of the blades he got the full shock, and, during the whole of the fight, considerately shortened, had to do his best, bravely enough, under the assault of repeated shocks. The mocking mirth of the aiding and watching Mephistopheles was usually restrained, sometimes was confined to a sardonic smile. On that night it was very audible, insistent, effective. And here was an instance of the actor's double consciousness merged into unity. Mephistopheles could not properly stop to inquire into Valentine's misfortunes or to express any sympathy. But it was quite in keeping with the character that he should laugh at Valentine's unavailing efforts. Thus, then, the surprise of the actor-manager and the

devilish merriment of Mephistopheles found absolutely common ground in as natural and appropriate a laugh as could be given on any stage.

There are examples enough in stage-history—French, German, Italian, English—of the dual personality preserved by players, men and women, though I do not remember an exact parallel to this crystallisation of the two individualities into one. There is one curious instance of a first-rate actor being startled into forgetting his stage identity in Goethe's *Faust* when it was given in London. I do not recall seeing it in print, and it was told to me by an eye and ear witness. It happened when a German company was giving a series of performances at the St. James's Theatre with one of the Devrients as the protagonist. He was playing Faust, and when the curtain rose he was discovered seated at a table and lost in meditation with his head bent to his breast. He raised his head, and the air of dejected philosophical musing gave place to a start of surprise followed by lively movements of impatience. Then he rushed with alacrity unbefitting his seeming years to the wing. Then he

was heard to exclaim, "*Du hast das* (expletive) *Buch vergessen*," and then he returned with a huge tome under his arm. This he placed on the table, at which he then sat down to begin his part of Faust, which I believe he played "excellent well." One can scarce imagine this happening with a first-rate English actor in a first-rate theatre; but I have noted more than once in a first-rate German theatre that the audience has regarded stage mishaps of this sort as absolutely non-existent. The play was the thing; and any trivial interruption of its proper course was a mere fantasy, which had no relation to a real and serious undertaking. It was a thing of nought, and whatever false appearance of reality it might have, it was to be treated as invisible and inaudible.

But to return, one curious instance of the double personality in Irving's case comes back to me from *The Corsican Brothers*. It may be remembered that at one point of the masked ball scene the Parisian twin, Louis, has to cross the stage with a moody and preoccupied air at the back of the noisy crowd of masks and pierrots. Just before this I had been with him in his dressing-room, eagerly discussing some

matter quite unconnected with theatrical affairs. When we were getting to a crucial point he was called to make this traverse. He gave a slight movement of impatience and then, "Come on," he said, "or we may forget this. We shall just have time to finish it going down and crossing the stage." So down the stairs and across the stage we went, Irving, the moment his foot touched the boards, assuming an air of profound melancholy the while he continued with me a conversation which was perfectly cheerful. And he had timed it exactly; the point at issue had been cleared up just as we reached the opposite wing.

There was another instance of a more rapid kind in *Faust*, the great drama which, however transmogrified, exercises a spell on the imagination and memory. Here, too, we had continued a conversation from his dressing-room down the stairs and to the wing where Mephistopheles waited the cue for his final appearance on the stage, wherefrom he carried off Faust in a blaze of lightning. The talk interested us both, and Irving kept it up till the last possible moment, when the man at the wing, ready with the lightning, urged him on. Then, "Step back

out of the way of the blaze," he cried to me, and in a moment was on the stage saying, in cutting and commanding accents, "My horses shiver in the morning air." His caution, and that almost as hastily given by the lightning-man, came none too soon, as I had become absorbed in the discussion. Then he returned, with Faust half-enwrapped in the cloak of Mephistopheles, and so soon as Faust left him resumed the conversation exactly where he had dropped it.

One criticism only, besides the unlucky one on the intrusion of the tearing scrunching devil, I had to make on his brilliant and biting representation of Mephistopheles. Before the play was really put in rehearsal he was in considerable doubt as to including or omitting the scene between the Student (or Scholar as Schuler is old-fashionedly translated), and Mephistopheles masquerading as the learned Doctor Faust. He spoke to me of his doubts, knowing that I had seen Goethe's play on the German stage. I saw it as a matter of fact at the old State Theatre in Dresden, not long before it was burnt down, given with a very remarkable cast. Frl. Ulrich, then in the

zenith of attraction and of dramatic subtlety and power, played Margarethe. Dettmer, who died all too young, was Faust, and, if he lacked some lightness in the love scenes, gave Goethe's full and unforgettable meaning to the first scene (where his delivery of the words, "*Die Thräne quillt! die Erde hat mich wieder*," caused a strange thrill to the whole audience), and to all the scenes in which the innermost meaning of Faust's part predominates over the relations with Gretchen. Mephistopheles was played by Jaffé with wonderful insight and command of stage resource, and with a certain quiet, yet burning, masterfulness which made one forget any lack of "presence"; while all the other characters were filled as well as is possible in an endowed theatre under judgmatic, kindly, autocratic management.

I gave Irving a sketch, as vivid as I could from memory, of the scene with the Student; at his special request told him how Jaffé, at the end of the "temptation speech" to the Student, had delivered the words, "*Eritis sicut Deus scientes bonum et malum.*" The German actor had risen from his seat just before this,

resting his hand in affectionate condescension on the Student's shoulder. As he spoke the Latin words he removed his hand and pointed heavenwards; then, turning from the dazzled pupil, gave one smile of diabolical significance, yet so fraught with humour that one was moved to sympathetic mirth, not to horror.

When in due time I first saw the scene at the Lyceum from the front, I found that Irving had charged the words with the full and terrible significance of which they are capable, pointing upwards at *bonum*, downwards at *malum*, and changing with such instantaneous speed back to the Doctor's tone of kindly interest, that one felt the Student was for the moment deaf to any wicked suggestion, the which, however, might well insist on a hearing when some hours later he recalled the interview. In discussing the matter afterwards, Irving told me that he had tried Jaffé's method, and had not found that he could make it as telling as the reading which he adopted. Which was the more artistic of the two? That seems a question for personal opinion rather than for abstract criticism. I stuck to it that Jaffé's, which may or may not

have been traditional, was the better rendering, but I could not but own that for an average intelligent English audience, with a natural love of quickly apprehensible "points," Irving's was the more effective. And as to stage effect, though he rarely allowed it to override or to oust other considerations, his knowledge was very wide and very accurate. Of his care as to the stage effect and stage management, I recall a characteristic example. I was with him in front at one of the last rehearsals of the Brocken Scene, and was naturally impressed by the seemingly spontaneous impulses which stirred the diabolical crew to wild, yet rhythmical movement. Had I known then, as I did much later, the simple-subtle devices by which the sway and rush of the crowd were secured, I might have expressed more admiration than I did. As Irving was sitting beside me, the dominating figure of Mephistopheles was, of course, missing in the final picture. To my praises of the whole effect he replied: "Very glad you liked it — given a good deal of trouble to it. But you know I can never see it as I should like to." "How do you mean?" I said. "Why"—this

with a humorous impatience and a pleasant touch of the harmless vanity that most fine artists have—"don't you see? I want to see the Red Man there, and, of course, I never can."

CHAPTER VI

Two curious parallels to the "Red Man" observations occur to me. One was at the last, or maybe the penultimate, rehearsal of the final scene in *The Dead Heart.* Again I was sitting with Irving in the stalls, and again he deplored that he could not, for want of the dominating figure, realise the whole effect of the picture. This time, however, a colleague volunteered to take the hero's position and pose, and no more than that was wanted, on the platform of the guillotine. Some little time was taken up before the attitude imagined by Irving was accurately indicated, but when that was done he was profuse in thanks to the volunteer, and then said with a satisfied sigh, "Yes, I think that ought to do." The other occasion of parallel was at the Théâtre Français, Paris, at a rehearsal of *Amphitryon.* Mounet-Sully, whose likeness of character in some attractive characteristics to Irving has been mentioned, was about to play Jupiter-Amphitryon for the first time, and had a

natural anxiety as to everything concerning the general effect. He did not, on that occasion, rehearse Jupiter's ascent into the clouds at the end. He wanted to see how it would strike the audience. Therefore he turned to Laroche, who was playing the part of the true Amphitryon, and said: "Would you mind, my dear friend, taking my place in that ascent? I do want to see what it looks like from the front." Laroche, with ready good humour, complied, and Mounet watched the ascent much as a child might watch a fairy tale come alive. When it was done, "Ah!" he said, "that is what it will look like. Nothing could be better. A thousand thanks. I shall make the ascent with a light heart." When he did make it before a critical audience the effect, aided, of course, by the sonorous tones of a voice which he had then learnt to modulate perfectly, was very telling in spite of the simple and old-fashioned mechanism employed.

There was a touch, too, somewhat akin to that noted about the "Red Man" in one of the few talks I had with Irving on *Macbeth* before its production. The conversation took place in a hansom cab, not an unusual circum-

stance when he was so full of work, physical and mental, that the only opportunities for a real quiet talk were when the curtain was down at night, and when, all too seldom, he could come to a quiet supper with no other guests. Immensely pleasant, as many friends will remember, were the gatherings at supper after the play in "the Beefsteak Room" at the Lyceum; but there, of course, there was no opportunity for any intimate talk. One part in which no adverse criticisms were ever launched at him was that of host.

However, on the occasion which I recall, he was speaking hurriedly, by necessity, of his general views of Macbeth, and a little more particularly as to the costume, which has always been a vexed point, and the facial appearance of Macbeth himself. He mentioned that he proposed to wear a longish fair moustache, whereof it was easy to see the effect in the mind's eye, but there was another question, as it seemed to me, worth considering, and just as I was about to touch on it he seemed to divine my thought—he was always "gleg at the uptak'" in that way. With a curious side glance, half shy, half defiant, and all tinged

with humour, he said hesitatingly, "And—the —you know, the old hair." I had been, as it happened, thinking over the effect of a fair wig, such as might fitly become a Scottish chief, but I saw in a moment that his decision was right. No one wore a wig better than he did, as I remember a brother-player saying in connection with his "Jeremy Diddler"; but, apart entirely from the score of comfort, his hair, worn longer than was the current fashion, had become a kind of asset, so much so that the absence of its familiar aspect in a tragic part might have distracted the attention of the audience, and so reacted on his own performance. The matter must seem light enough in itself; yet it is an instance of the care with which he envisaged every side, every point, of the situation he had to face.

What is by no means light is the witness borne to his unflagging study, and to the fact that his art constantly grew by what it fed on, by the differences between his first and his subsequent appearances in the part of Macbeth.

Looking back upon his earlier Macbeth, I think that, as in the case cited of Romeo, he did not succeed in a complete expression to

the audience of what he conceived to be the true meaning of the character. But there was an important difference between the two cases. In that of Romeo he felt that a complete interpretation could not be given, that physical difficulties must always bar absolute understanding between himself and those on the other side of the footlights. With Macbeth it was otherwise. The actor was not of robust make, but there was no reason why Macbeth should not be, as Irving was, a slight man of great physical endurance. The imaginative side of Macbeth's character had captivated him, that very side by which Macbeth stands and falls. For if he had been a stalwart, unimaginative warrior-ruffian neither superstition nor remorse would have checked him. There would have been no faltering, no gradual change in the course of murderous success from the creature of conscience and remorse to the self-confessed villain, whose one idea is to hold what he has monstrously got, no matter how many further crimes that holding may involve.

Partly from excess of nervousness on the first night, when on his first entrance the rattling of his armour must have been audible

throughout the house, he over-emphasised the Chieftain's accessibility to things which appeal only to a poetic temperament, and he failed to indicate with sufficient mark the gradual passage from the state of the seer who, fresh from victory as a great warrior in his King's cause, is caught in the meshes of "supernatural soliciting," to that of the Monarch through crime who is ready to disregard all, stake all, rather than lose his prize, reft from him at last by the very means which tempted him to grasp it. Partly also his accenting of those qualities which laid Macbeth so open to the Witches' attack, and made him falter and hesitate at the first terrible crime were yet more accented, in that Lady Macbeth was then played by a fine actress who took very distinctly the masculine view of Lady Macbeth associated with Mrs. Siddons, who, however, was compelled to that view from what she knew would and would not be in keeping with her own physical qualifications. And, again, the impression of a "first night" was then a good deal more than now the key to the lasting impression to be produced by any new venture. Anyhow, there were critics who saw

much promise in the opening scenes, found much fault in succeeding ones, and were full of admiration for the desperate and commanding bravery of the conclusion. Yet it was not likely that an actor of unusual intellect and study would set out to show Macbeth as a craven who displays courage only when he is at bay. Thus it may be said that if his intention did not quite reach his critics, they on their side did not go far enough to meet him; but in this matter every allowance must be made for writers who had to hurry from the theatre in order to sign (practically), seal, and deliver a long dissertation in time for the issue of a morning paper.

From one unpublished criticism, written during the earlier performances of the tragedy, I may quote a few extracts, because it seems to me to express Irving's intention, and because it was written by my mother, who, a great admirer as well as friend of Macready and not least an admirer of his Macbeth, saw in the then new Macbeth, in spite of some shortcomings in expression, the same qualities of allied intellect and genius which had made Macready's Macbeth one of his greatest parts.

Of the scene directly after the murder, the scene which specially gave rise to the notion that Irving's Macbeth was a craven at heart, this is said:—

"The actor is not so impressive after the murder as before it. He assumes an attitude of terror, he speaks in a hoarse whisper, his knees are bent, even his jaw dropped; it would be difficult to point out any deficiency in the details of his representation: it can only be said that it fails to excite general sympathy: it has been said that he is too physically paralysed in this scene. If that were all, and the agony which prostrated him appeared to be real, his spectators would drift on in the current of his passion for the time, and would criticise him afterwards. Perhaps there is here an absence of inward emotion sufficient to give truth to the effects attempted."

This I think was a misapprehension; it was not the inward emotion, but the carrying power which was then wanting. The actor's idea throughout the tragedy was that which the same critic discerned and noted in the earlier scenes, the idea of an originally great, finely-strung nature dragged down by vaulting

ambition to that very brutality by which alone it would have been possible to plunge scathless into a sea of crime. And this idea was again obvious to the critic in "the final interview with the witches," where Macbeth's aspect was "severe. His voice has lost its sympathetic tones; his humanity is deserting him; here his true belief in the dealings of sorcery sets in; hitherto he has helped himself on by it, but now it has become a paramount influence to which he is made subject by his crimes; he is wound up to know and confront the worst that the worst can do." The same inspiration is traced by the same critic in the scene preceding the battle; and that the conception of a character suffering gradual deterioration from the letting loose of evil passions by supernatural interference, then a potent cause, was always Irving's key to Macbeth, I have never doubted. The point, however, is that when he revived *Macbeth* he had learned, by study and added experience, how to convey his own idea to his audience, or, in a well-found phrase, to project his thought "across the footlights."

If I have seemed to dwell overmuch on Macbeth, it is because the undertaking of the

part was, after his discussed but generally admired Hamlet, a crucial test; and because the first impression was perhaps never fully corrected by the second essay, which went very far to obliterate all former shortcomings.

A good deal has at all times been, and always will be, said and written as to the hard fate of the great actor in that there is no enduring record of his genius. It might be answered that the fame, to take two instances, of Roscius and of Garrick, are insistent replies to this assertion. But there is, of course, a large amount of truth in the contention. And part of that truth is this, that when an actor of the highest rank has not fully succeeded in showing his public exactly what he means in a great part, then to impress his meaning upon that public in a second and successful rendering is no easy task. The criticisms on the first and greatly daring essay are still remembered; and even the most scrupulous of critics may be, all unconsciously perhaps, handicapped by previous impressions.

CHAPTER VII

THE story of Irving's Othello was not unlike that of the Macbeth in its general lines. It was stated certainly by one critic, and, if my memory serves me, by several others, that Irving's performance of Othello, when, as Edwin Booth's host at the Lyceum, he alternated the parts of Othello and Iago with the great American actor, was a new conception of the character, differing very importantly from that which inspired his first rendering of the noble Moor. Critics who took this view were, in my judgment, completely misled by confounding conception with execution. I have no reason to suppose that Irving ever really altered the conception of a part when once he had thoroughly studied it, save in one truly amazing instance. Of this instance I am told by my old friend Mr. F. Tyars, a thoroughly excellent and accomplished actor, for very many years one of Irving's most trusted lieutenants. On one occasion he, as Irving's understudy, played

King Arthur, and a fine, dignified, chivalrous performance he made of it. I learn from him that the exception to Irving's general rule was actually in the tremendous character of King Lear, and that the change was definitely adopted in the time between Irving's arrival at the theatre to dress and the rise of the curtain on the first night of the production. Such a transformation is as bewildering to the student as one imagines it must have been to Irving's play-fellows. It fully accounts for the strangely hesitating touch which was noticeable in Irving's treatment of the earlier scenes on that night, and which never wholly disappeared afterwards. The swiftness of mind which decided so portentous an alteration in so short a time could hardly meet with an equally swift response from other faculties trained through many rehearsals to obey a different command from heart and intellect. Nor, I think, can this "handy-dandy" process have failed to affect the actor's reflections on the part and on his own performance of it as time went on. Therefore, it may well have had something to do with the fact that he never thought

of reviving the play. For his own sake this was matter for rejoicing to those who knew how much "more than common" the acting of the character moved and shook him.

But nothing here said is in contradiction of what has been put forward as to his never-ceasing study of every part he undertook, whereof a further instance comes into my mind as I write, and may therefore, perhaps, be here mentioned. It was told to me by my mother who, during a revival of *Hamlet*, observed, with friendly concern, that he was looking harassed and worn. "Ah!" he said, "that's nothing; only want of sleep last night. As you know, with acting and with the management of the theatre I have not too many hours for sleep, and I was kept awake by thinking of that poor young fellow." "Of whom?" "Why, of Hamlet! Think of him, all alone with his misery in that abominable court, and you won't wonder that it kept me awake." This is noteworthy, too, as showing that to Irving as to Macready the great characters of the drama were not abstract ideas to be dissected, or ingenious imaginations to be turned to the player's account in a showy

performance, but living, thinking, feeling beings to enlist sympathy, study, penetration whereby the actor might call up their semblance as in a mirror to the very best of his power. But to Othello, who is certainly quite as much alive, though in a very different fashion, as is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

As with the part of Romeo, but to a decidedly less degree, I think it undeniable that when Irving first appeared as Othello, he was not able to give complete expression to the emotions and to the passion which in truth he felt and strove to convey to his audiences. He had not then reached the point completely attained in his final stage appearances, when an actor can husband his resources with such supreme art that none can detect moments of weakness or hint that, like Edmund Kean, he is obscuring certain passages in order to make the fire of others spring up with a brighter blaze. There were other difficulties in his way. He was not his own manager, "but that's not much" considering how friendly were the relations between the old management of the Lyceum and himself. Still, in no calling can acting as a colleague, even on ideal terms, be quite the same thing as

being one's own master. What is more important is that the actor, in essaying one of the most trying parts, mentally and physically, in the whole roll of drama, ancient and modern, had to face the memory or the shade of great Othellos of the past—Edmund Kean, for instance, and Macready — though comparatively few critics ranked Macready's Othello among his finest performances — but Kean especially. Why a tradition as to the surpassing qualities of Kean's Othello should have established itself firmly is not glaringly clear. Hazlitt, certainly no unfriend to Kean's acting, wrote of it, "It is true that in parts it rose as high as human genius can go," but he added, and this seems to have been generally forgotten, that in other parts "though powerful, the whole effect is thrown away in a wrong direction and disturbs our idea of the character. . . . Othello was tall, but that is nothing; he was black, but that is nothing. But he was not fierce, and that is everything." Hazlitt dwelt on the opposition of "fierceness" to the Moor's nature, and went on to say that Kean, in general all passion, energy, and relentless will, "wants imagination, that faculty that contemplates

events, and broods over feelings with a certain calmness and grandeur; his feelings almost always hurry on to action, and hardly ever repose themselves. He is too often in the highest key of passion, too uniformly on the verge of extravagance, too constantly on the rack. This does very well in certain characters, as Zanga or Bajazet, where there is merely a physical passion, a boiling of the blood to be expressed, but it is not so in the lofty-minded and generous Moor."

William Robson, "the Old Playgoer," wrote of Othello that he had never seen "any one who approached the Othello of Shakespeare. Kemble was, with all his fine conception, correct reading, and noble person, too cold; Young was too declamatory. . . . Kean, of whom such boast was made, was nothing but a little vixenish black girl in short petticoats." This dismissal may seem somewhat curt, but William Robson was nothing if not critical, and nothing if not sincere. Doubtless, the convictions and feelings which inspired such short and sharp condemnation were the same that led Thomas Cooper, the American tragedian, who was an Englishman by birth, to say that

"Kean cannot come within a mile of Othello. His snarling, snappish speech and his gusty flights of vehement passion are all very striking and effective; but they are directly opposite to the physical and intellectual forces of Othello. This is clearly indicated by the conscious deliberation and dignity of the language in which Shakespeare has presented the character. . . . Shakespeare's words tell us what kind of passion inflamed the Moor and drove him to desperate action. There was no petulant snap in it or snarlish irritability; on the contrary it was 'as broad and general as the casing air,' not bright and evanescent as the forked flash." John Kemble expressed the same opinion more tersely in saying that "if the justness of Kean's conception had been equal to the brilliancy of its execution it would have been perfect. But the whole thing is a mistake, the fact being that the Moor was a slow man."

One may gather then that Kean's Othello, however fiery in certain passages of passion, was not Shakespeare's Moor nor as a whole a great performance. Yet the shadow of its greatness in a tradition that grew by remoteness lasted long enough to affect the fortunes

of the Othello first shown by Irving, the first actor of foremost rank in many parts who had attempted the character since the days of Macready, and those of Phelps at Sadler's Wells.

There was another thing which may appear absurdly unimportant until one reflects how often seeming trifles will grow weighty with audiences who are, perhaps, all unconscious of the influence that moves them. Before Irving had fully decided on playing Othello he had talked with me of the part and of the Moor's colour and costume. As to this last we were at one on the point that Othello should wear the dress and armour of his adopted country. The strong reasons for this are excellently put in a footnote to the remarks of William Robson before quoted on Othello :—

"There can be no question that the dress should be that of a General in the Venetian service and not like his (Kean's), such an habiliment as was never seen anywhere but on the stage, or rather at a booth at a country fair. Soldiers of fortune, of course, assumed the arms and garb of the country they served under."

To this a hostile critic might reply that in plays so full of anachronisms as Shakespeare's

it is absurd to insist on correct reproduction of the costume or manners belonging to any particular time, and that the simplest and most satisfactory plan would be that the players should follow the example of their predecessors long ago and assume the full dress of their own day to portray Hamlet, Othello, and all the rest. It is not likely, however, that the theory would find favour if put in practice; and as that is so, surely the best way is to fix on a time which was presumably in Shakespeare's thought, and conform as nearly as possible to its known observances.

There can be no reasonable doubt that these, in Othello's case, would have enjoined his being apparelled as a Venetian General. Thus apparelled he was shown in a beautiful water-colour sketch by Sir John Tenniel, which before and during the first performance of *Othello*, and to the best of my recollection ever afterwards, hung in Irving's dressing-room. After this sketch his armour and costume were designed and executed, and very well they became him.

The effect on the audience, however, was not identical with that produced on some approving critics. Irving seemed always to have,

apart from what reached him by hearsay, a kind of sixth sense as to what an audience was thinking and feeling—a component part, no doubt, of the magnetic contact he established between them and himself, or, if you will, a corollary to it. Not long after the first night of the play I noted that he had introduced decidedly marked hints of Oriental costume in the scenes where armour was not the only wear. He explained this to me by saying, "The fact is 'they' expect to see Othello as something entirely Eastern and mysterious; they've always thought of him in that way, and they don't at all understand finding him dressed like the other characters in the play. I ought to have thought of that and given up the idea, which, as you know, I greatly liked, of correctness." The concessions made were no doubt judicious from this point of view, but Irving thought, rightly I imagine, that a certain amount of irreparable harm to the production's success had been done by the first surprise or disappointment of spectators who had expected to see a thoroughly Moorish Moor.[1] The whole

[1] Curiously enough, according to Alexandre Dumas (*Mémoires*, iv. 273), the great French tragedian Talma went through exactly

thing was successful enough in a managerial aspect, but so far as Othello was concerned it was not until his own reproduction of the play that Irving's execution unmistakably conveyed his conception of the part to his audiences at large. The occasion on which, as mentioned above, with characteristic courtesy and friendliness he offered Edwin Booth, whose genius had been cramped at the Princess's, the hospitality of the Lyceum, was a fortunate one; but that would have been little in regard to Irving's Othello (who this time assumed an Oriental dignity of robing throughout), had not the actor brought to the representation of Othello a store of new study and experience in transmitting to others his own emotion and passion. The conception was the same as it had been before—that the Moor, as Kemble had it, was a slow man, one that is "not easily moved, but who, being moved, is stirred to the very depths,"

the same experience. He also considered, rightly, that Othello should be habited as a Venetian general; and he wore dresses and armour, as did Irving, designed with absolute correctness. He, too, found that his public resented the innovation and wanted the trappings of the East in all their strangeness. Consequently, after the first performance, he went back to the traditional Moorish costume.

but on this later occasion the actor's thought and feeling were plain for all folk to see.

The scene, formerly given, wherein Othello falls in a fit, was now omitted, possibly because Booth, alternating Othello and Iago with Irving, was not accustomed to it in either character. It had been one of Irving's finest scenes; but it is not necessary to the play; and it must add greatly to the strain, already immense, of playing Othello at all.

Booth's Othello was somewhat nearer to Kean's, perhaps, than was Irving's; he was splendid in some bursts of sudden passion, but he missed the significance of the swelling, not sudden, tide "like to the Pontick sea." His Iago was more bluff than Irving's; he dwelt more on the qualities which got for him the name of "honest Iago." The scene in which he entices Cassio to drunkenness was a masterpiece of busy unobtrusive villainy; and the performance throughout was as clearly marked by genius as those who had seen him in his best parts at the Princess's expected. With Irving's brilliant, subtle, daring Iago I do not remember that any critic found fault, except, perhaps, one who considered that Iago ought

to be reposeful, and ought not to wear so handsome a dress.

Irving's performance of Iago was the occasion of the first and only appearance in the part of a dramatic critic of my old friend and then colleague, Mr., now Professor, George Saintsbury, of whom the late Sir Walter Besant said very truly that he was a born critic of all things human. As the occasion was unique it seems to give a reason for departure from the rule I have made for myself against quoting from contemporary criticisms. Mr. Saintsbury then, rather persuaded against his will, for he was no habitual playgoer, went with me to see Irving in Iago, and wrote his impressions of the performance in a magazine called *Our Times* and conducted by A. J. Duffield, which deserved a longer life than it had. Mr. Saintsbury, in some prefatory words, explained that though as a rule he did not care for playgoing, yet he wrote as one who had seen most of the famous players of the preceding twenty-five years, and added, what was familiar to all his friends, that he knew Shakespeare as well as he knew the multiplication table. He went on to a masterly sketch of Iago's character as

it had always appeared to him. Protesting against the tradition that he was a sort of human fiend, one who said "Evil, be thou my good" and took "a conspicuous and quite genuine pleasure in harming and hurting everything and everybody he encountered," the writer gave various cogent reasons against this estimate of Iago. Though, no doubt, something of a soldier of fortune, "he is a gentleman. He is treated as an equal by every one, and 'three great ones of the city' sue to Othello for his lieutenancy." The critic found, partly from close study of Emilia's part as written, that "it is fair to suppose that up to the time of the Cyprus voyage, no one knew anything against Iago of a serious kind. Now incarnate devils, doing harm for harm's sake, do not live till eight-and-twenty without giving some sample of their disposition. Iago appears to me to have been a person with a strong sense of humour, darkening into cynicism, no sense of morality, an Italian tendency to revenge and self-indulgence, and an extraordinary subtlety of brain. He is mortally offended by the putting of Cassio over his head, and he is certainly jealous, if only in a

general and suspicious way, of Cassio and Othello himself."

Personally I think that in what follows, Mr. Saintsbury made something too much of this special jealousy, but that scarcely affects his general view of the part (which will surely commend itself to most readers), especially for the purposes of dramatic criticism.

Mr. Saintsbury found with pleasure that Irving's carrying out of the part in the main fitted to the writer's previous conception of it. "The outward presentment of the part pleased me particularly. The rich dress, bought, doubtless, with some of the unlucky 'snipe's' gold, was exactly that befitting the gentleman adventurer. The manner, at first scornful, and with a slight touch of soldier-like brag about it, hardening gradually into that of the conspirator, yet without any affectation of mystery or stage fiendishness, was equally appropriate." All, in fact, was consonant with the showing forth of a man unprincipled, seeking pleasure, profit, revenge; not inevitably a villain, but ready to be one when opportunity came, and ready to pay the stakes without a murmur when his great game was lost.

Irving's manner "generally in the Roderigo scenes, the rapid and fantastic oratory with which he bewilders the poor chuff, his lavishness of gesture and pantomime, all calculated to distract his hearer's attention and keep it from unpleasant despondency; and, still more, unpleasant inquiries as to the employment of the money he spends so freely, appeared to me masterly. The well-known scene with Desdemona on the port, with the matchless character of woman, which sums up in half-a-dozen lines all that had been said from Simonides to the Fabliau-writers, was equally good." Mr. Saintsbury noted, most justly and as was to be expected, that in the modern stage version of *Othello*, Iago is heavily handicapped by the omission of the Bianca scenes, for want of which the ancient's speeches and proceedings might easily seem to lack plausibility; and he thought it much credit to the actor that, "by reason of the ease, speciousness, and rapidity of his method, no lack of plausibility was felt." The soliloquies, again, commanded special appreciation. "Mr. Irving," the critic said, "makes the very utmost of the soliloquies of Iago, and the successive stages

of the 'monstrous birth' are made absolutely clear." Finally, he singled out for special comment two scenes, beginning with that wherein the feigned consolation of Desdemona "brings upon Iago the unintentional weight of his wife's violent language. Nowhere is he more morally detestable, nowhere is he intellectually greater. . . . The actor has to throw in a great deal of expression, and yet to remember that Iago is 'honest Iago,' a plain, bluff sort of person, not a fawning, wheedling courtier. Mr. Irving does this consummately, and the single genuine utterance of the scene, the short 'You're a fool; go to!' to Emilia, is given at once with such an apparent pooh-poohing of the absurd suggestion of there being a 'cogging knave' somewhere, and at the same time such a hearty intensity of double meaning as make it admirable."

The other scene was the last, where, when Iago is at bay, "the short retort to Othello, 'I bleed, sir, but not killed,' is equally admirable. Stoical composure, outward preservation of respect to the general, and yet a covert suggestion of the same ironic kind as that which Othello himself had made

on the futility of his wrath, are all implied in it."

This, as has been said, was the one essay in dramatic criticism made by a master in critical science. The opinion of most habitual dramatic critics of the time was that Irving's Iago, as deep as he was engaging and versatile, was both new and true. Certainly those who saw the alternated performances of Irving and Booth are not likely ever to forget them.

In both characters the American actor had his own "business" in the scenes where Othello or Iago, as the case might be, was the dominating figure; and it will be seen that this involved a good deal of care and nicety, when it is remembered that the position of Desdemona's bed in the last scene had to be entirely changed every night. I heard from Booth himself the warmest expressions as to the complete thoughtfulness and thoroughness with which the English actor had met, and more than met, all his wishes.

The mention of the last scene of the play recalls to me yet another illustration of the actor's "dual personality," which reminds one

of Garrick cracking jokes at the wing between the passionate outbursts of Lear, taken from the first representation of Othello at the Lyceum. It was told to me, not by Irving himself, but by the actress who was then playing Desdemona, and who clearly did not believe in the "dual" theory, since she found its exemplification somewhat upsetting. "What," she said in pathetic tones, "what do you think he said when he was supposed to be stifling me behind the curtains? Can you guess?"

I replied, naturally, that I could not.

"Why, he asked me what my mother had ordered for supper. Think of it!"

I did think of it; and came to the conclusion that with Garrick and with Irving this thrusting of trivial matters into the interstices of a great emotion may at first sight seem (as it did to Doctor Johnson with his "Punch has no feelings") evidence of shallowness, but is in fact a temporary and much-needed respite for an actor who has been, and immediately again will be, at the highest strain of mental and physical intensity, in feeling and expressing a storm of passion.

CHAPTER VIII

IRVING had a rooted conviction that Garrick, undoubtedly great in comedy, was at any rate less great in tragedy. I do not well know on what precise grounds he rested this belief, for though it was held by some excellent judges in Garrick's own time, it certainly was repudiated by as many or more other judges of no less excellence and with equal opportunities. Possibly the story of Garrick saying to a younger actor (Bannister, I think) that a tragic part could be got through well enough by an intelligent actor, but that comedy was a very serious matter, may have had something to do with the idea. Yet one cannot but imagine that this was Garrick's humorous way of stating a proposition in which, on examination, a good deal of truth will be found, though it by no means implies that an actor cannot be equally good in tragedy and comedy. The weight of evidence seems to show that this was exemplified by Garrick; and it was suffi-

ciently proved by Irving in his comparatively few appearances in comedy during his London career. As Joseph Surface in *The School for Scandal* and as Doricourt in *The Belle's Stratagem* he showed that he could assume the costume, the manners and the manner, of the powder period, as though born to them. His acting in Joseph Surface brought to mind Elia's essay on "The Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," with his remarks on Palmer's Joseph as an example; his Doricourt was the essence of light and courtly gaiety, while his scene of mock madness moved the whole audience to delighted laughter.

His greatest essay in comedy at the Lyceum was of course Benedick. The part, a very difficult one, had been played in many ways. Garrick, one may be sure, gave it grace and gaiety enough, but showed a strange misconception of the character in that, at the end of Act iv. scene 1, he made his exit, to challenge Claudio, cocking his hat and swaggering deliberately and self-contentedly off the stage. The mere context, rightly considered, might have prevented an action so out of keeping with the chivalrous and court-bred Benedick's

character. But as to consulting the context, Garrick was no respecter of "Shakespeare" as written by "a person of the same name." Of this his abominable tamperings with Shakespeare's plays are proof more than enough. The other side, that of the tried soldier, has sometimes been made too prominent, as by Dawisen, the celebrated German actor, who, in his day, reigned supreme as Shylock and as Mephistopheles. His Benedick, according to Herman Merivale, was "a most quaint conception. He was a rough soldier of fortune out of his element, amusedly puzzled by the fine company he got into." A quaint conception indeed, but perhaps Dawisen, compelled by the manager of the State Theatre to play the part, had to do the best he could with his own resources, of which he knew the limitations.

The distinct mark throughout of Irving's Benedick was that he gave full due both to the soldier and to the gentleman of the Court, that he showed Benedick as a man one could imagine successful and honoured in both capacities. The subtlety of his comedy, fine as could be yet never so superfine as to miss its

mark, left an enduring impression, equalled by that which was produced by the moments of deep feeling when Benedick, torn two ways by his friendship for Claudio and his love for Beatrice, ends by going out to challenge Claudio with a manner reminiscent of triumph on the field, but without a hint of levity or braggadocio.

One incident connected with Benedick is a proof of Irving's readiness to hear and to profit by reasoned objections. Many actors, when they have to depict emotion without speech assigned by the author, find it a help to murmur to themselves words illustrating the feeling by which they are to be animated. Sometimes, instead of murmuring, they speak unconsciously so loud as to be audible in front. Thus I remember the case of a brilliant singer who just after singing *Carmen* in French in Paris sang it in Italian in London. At a moment when she had to express in by-play the hope and belief that her lover was arriving, she said to herself in French, from recent habit, "*C'est lui!*" but the words were spoken so loud that they reached the front rows of stalls and produced an odd enough effect.

I am pretty sure that Irving did not habitually resort to this device for smoothing the way of by-play, but he used it during the war of wits with Beatrice in the masked scene, and, by an oversight, fell upon employing an entirely modern phrase to express his discomfiture. The words caught my ear on the first night with a momentary impress of uneasy surprise; but I regarded the matter as an accident and gave it no further thought. For one reason and another it was some time before I paid another visit to the theatre, and, meanwhile, I heard from Clifford Harrison, an admirer of Irving and a keen Shakespearean student, that, on the night of his visit, the same words had been audibly spoken and had disturbed his sense of the fitness of things. Upon this hint I spoke, hurrying my next visit to the Lyceum on purpose to do so. Irving was genuinely surprised and distressed by what I told him. "Do I say that really?" he asked. "Quite wrong of course, quite wrong and out of place. Must be seen to at once." The piece had then been running so long that I suppose he would have found it very difficult to drop altogether the habit of the aside which was no aside; but

from that moment he brought its phraseology into consonance with the surrounding text.

A part as different as can be from Benedick, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, is now rightly regarded in England as a fine comedy part. But so far as one can ascertain Irving was practically the first protagonist and manager who gave to it its right importance. Phelps played it at Sadler's Wells, but there is no record of Garrick, Kean, Macready, regarding it as within their sphere. Charles Lamb saw it in its quiddity, immortalised Bensley's performance of it, and recorded, greatly to John Kemble's credit, that in Bensley's absence "black Jack" thought it "no derogation to succeed to the part." But this was obviously brought forward for argumentative reasons. It was not an instance of the part being put habitually in the first rank, but a backing of Lamb's own opinion by the fact that one great actor-manager shared Lamb's opinion of its importance, to the extent of taking it up when an actor who had shown its import was not available. But Elia lamented that after Kemble's days "the very tradition" of Malvolio

as a first-rate part was "worn out from the stage."

I have never seen the play in Germany, but when it was acted in London by the Meiningen Company, the part, excellently played on broad general lines, was relegated to a secondary rank and shorn of its true dignity, for which was substituted a swelling pomposity. Malvolio was too much, as Lamb has it, "a thing of straw, a jack in office," too little of the "master of the household," with a full "generosity of birth and feeling." Although it is notorious, to some Germans, that Shakespeare is better understood in Germany than in England, this notion of Malvolio's proper place may have come from the English tradition, broken for a time by John Kemble with Bensley's aid, and finally overset by Irving.

He, one imagines, had assimilated Elia's delightful dissertation on the character before himself undertaking it. At any rate, he had all the well-bred dignity which Charles Lamb rightly thought inseparable from a proper conception of the part: "his bearing" was "lofty, a little above his station, but probably not much above his deserts." He seemed fully

"a man of education," who was "master of the household to a great princess—a dignity probably conferred upon him for other respects than age or length of service"; all the finer, therefore, was the comedy when "the poison of self-love, in his conceit of the Countess's affection," began to work, and, as with Bensley, "you would have thought that the hero of La Mancha, in person, stood before you." Indeed, there was so strong an infusion of Don Quixote in Irving's Malvolio as to discount his subsequent brief appearance as the Don himself in a patchy piece which was too like "a wet cloak ill laid-up." Something to me, personally, he seemed to miss, in Malvolio's bright hour of delusion, of the towering exaltation described of Bensley; but this impression may have been due to a preconceived notion born of a close acquaintance with Lamb's essay from my childhood up. One fault there was in his earliest renderings of the deluded and ill-treated Steward. Lamb said truly that "even in his abused state of chains and darkness, a sort of greatness seems never to desert him. He argues highly and well with the supposed Sir Topas, and philosophises gallantly

on his straw." Elia, however, who knew the true theory of comedy through and through, would scarce have applauded Bensley for striking a truly tragic note in the prison scene. Irving, moved by his quick and wide sympathy, felt so keenly with and for Malvolio in his monstrous ill-usage, that at first his playing in this scene carried one into pathos so real that it killed amusement. But here was yet another instance of his openness to criticism. No sooner was this pointed out to him than he set to work to remodel his performance in this scene, and bring it back to the field of comedy without endangering Malvolio's inborn dignity. The serious meaning given to his exit speech in the last act, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you," is amply warranted by the context.

One great Shakespearean comedy part, in some sense the greatest, he undoubtedly would have played had occasion served; and it is matter for lasting regret that occasion did not serve. When I was sitting in his dressing-room at the Lyceum one night, he pointed to the wall behind me and said, "I think you'll find something new over there." I looked

round and perceived an amazingly clever sketch, by whom I cannot recall, of Irving, dressed for the part, but with his natural face untouched, and wearing the accustomed *pince-nez*, as Falstaff. "Yes," he went on as I turned back again, "the make-up is wanting, but you'll be satisfied with that when I play the part." I saw that he was in earnest, and was first surprised, then delighted. I knew well that what he said about the face was thoroughly well founded; and it may here be mentioned that he always made up with a singular swiftness and an unerring certainty as to the effect which was, doubtless, due to study and practice. When I had expressed my pleasure at the news, I said, "What about the voice, and so on?" For answer he became for the moment Falstaff himself; his face seemed to broaden and develop into the very semblance of the fat knight; and he spoke some of Falstaff's words in a deep, rich voice with a wondrous unctuousness of tone and expression; and, as has been mentioned in other cases, he called up for a brief minute not only Falstaff himself, but with him all the strange company at the Boar's Head. In

conversation afterwards on the character, I found he agreed with me that Falstaff, a gentleman by upbringing, bore himself as a gentleman on good occasion, and was in no kind of way the poltroon he is sometimes represented to be. Henderson was admittedly *the* Hamlet and *the* Falstaff of his time, and I believe that Irving's Falstaff might have taken rank with his Prince of Denmark. But the intention of playing the part was naturally dropped for, at any rate, a considerable time to come, when Mr. Tree took up the character, and there came no opportunity for reviving it.

In modern comedy, Irving's only appearance during his management at the Lyceum was in the revival of Albery's *Two Roses*. This revival was remarkable in that it introduced for the first time to the London stage, in the character of Caleb Deecie, a since highly and justly distinguished actor, who, during his long stay at the Lyceum, was loyal and devoted to his chief, and in later years has been devoted and loyal to that chief's memory—Mr. George Alexander. It was also remarkable for the proof of advancement in his art which was given by Irving's renewed impersonation of

the callous and vastly entertaining adventurer, Digby Grant, the part in which he had made his first lasting popular impression in London. The very improvement in combined fineness and breadth of execution had, however, its drawbacks, since it seemed to mark unmistakably the thinness despite the cleverness of the material on which the actor had to work. The slightness again of the piece had been, of course, less perceptible in a theatre very much smaller than the Lyceum. The revival was not intended to be more than a stop-gap, and it more than served its turn in that way. Yet it led to Irving telling me, towards the end of the run, that he should never again appear in a coat and trouser piece. "They," he said, "don't care about it, and no more do I, so this will be my last appearance in that way." To this resolution he adhered with only one exception, for I do not count in the unique creation of Corporal Brewster in Sir Conan Doyle's *A Story of Waterloo*, which would have made its enduring mark in any costume of any century. As to this fine little play, Irving told me that it first found its way to fame by what seemed like

mischance. It was at Bristol, or, at any rate, somewhere on the "Western Circuit" of Themis, and, in old time, of Thespis, that the sudden illness of one of the company knocked out a one-act play which had been relied on to "fill the bill." Irving luckily remembered the play by Mr. Conan Doyle, as he then was. It wanted even less scenery than Mr. Yates, in *Mansfield Park*, thought indispensable, and the cast was very easily arranged. It was put in rehearsal at top speed, and produced with a triumphant success, to be afterwards echoed in London.

In connection with *Two Roses*, one incident, by force of its oddity, has stuck in my memory. One night (it was probably the first night) in a spirited scene with Jack Wyatt, played by Mr. Charles Warner, one half of Irving's moustache fell off. Deftly, and taking cover under his tall hat, Irving removed the other half, and appeared with a shaven lip through the rest of the play. The person most to be pitied was Mr. Warner, who, facing Irving, saw the whole thing, and preserved gravity enough to prevent any infection of tittering in the audience. Wherefore I presently, in

print, congratulated Irving and Mr. Warner on presence of mind preserved throughout "a stage accident." Thereon a kindly critic, writing of theatrical affairs at large and thinking that folk might be unduly alarmed, reassured them in his feuilleton by explaining that the "stage accident" was nothing worse than the loss of half a moustache. I thought that this sequence of notices would amuse Irving, and told it to him at the next opportunity in his dressing-room. "Oh," he said, with dabs of paint and powder interjecting his words, "said that, did he? Ah! what an ass he is—what an ass he is!" Now in this there was not a scrap of ill-nature, or annoyance, or anything unkindly. It was simply that his perception of the absurd was as quick as his perception of far higher things; for the moment the absurd side caught him so completely as to occlude any perception of the kindly feeling which had prompted the writer of the reassuring paragraph.

CHAPTER IX

THE word melodrama "surprises by himself" a good deal of diverse matters. Most English authorities trace the word back to its original meaning of a drama interrupted or accompanied by music, while M. Pougin, in his *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, troubles himself in no way about this, and defines *mélodrame* as "an exaggerated kind of drama invented in the early nineteenth century for the greater glory of boulevard theatres." In England it has long borne the meaning defined in Chambers's Encyclopædia (from which one learns that the word was originally applied, by Ottavio Rinuccini, to *opera*)—"a romantic play, depending mainly on situations and an effective *dénouement*." The definition covers a wide enough field, and, taken according to the letter only, might be pleaded in justification of Charles Reade's dictum that *Macbeth* is a melodrama. Certainly it does include a number of plays which may fairly be called classics, as well as

others to which a very active life has been given by one great actor — such plays, for instance, as *The Bells* and *Rob Roy*, the London fame of which latter piece was due mainly to Macready, with whom and with his audiences the hero was a favourite part. In his time "melodrama," in its acquired sense, was a comparatively novel term, and he was practically the first of the line of great actors at whom the reproach was aimed that he was an inferior tragedian, though a master of melodrama—the very same reproach that in later days was, with others, levelled at Irving.

Curiously enough G. H. Lewes, on Macready retiring from the stage, wrote a brief, yet elaborate, article in answer to an imagined questioner demanding a reply to the inquiry, "Was Macready a great actor?" and answered emphatically in the affirmative, although his argument throughout is on the lines of the summing-up at the end, that "Macready *was* a great actor. Though not a man of genius, he was a man of intellect, of culture, of representative talent, with decided physical advantages, capable of depicting a wide range of unheroic characters with truth and power, an

ornament to his profession, the pride of his friends, and the favourite of the public." It is added that he won his position when Kean and Young were both to be reckoned with, that after their retirement he stood alone, and that on his own retirement he left no successor. Certain parts of this remarkable passage in an article as odd as it is interesting, might be applied with scarce the change of a word to Irving; but, emphatically, not those statements which, had they been generally accepted of Macready, would surely have prevented his leaving behind him the name of a great actor. Again, Irving had not the backing of those "decided physical advantages" which Lewes mentioned. On the contrary, as is said to have been the case with the great lyric actor, Ronconi, in certain parts of heroic mould his intellect and genius triumphed over the absence of physical attributes, in voice and build, traditionally associated with those characters. The point, however, is that Lewes, who was nothing if not paradoxical, though dubbing Macready great, asserted practically that he was not in truth a tragedian, but was a fine actor of melodrama. There was nothing

surprising, then, in the same thing being said of Irving by some critics of a later generation; and it is still less surprising that in neither case has the contention been upheld, or seems likely to be upheld in future, by the general verdict.

There was, however, considering these things, a touch of irony in the facts that to two of the most remarkable "melodramas" known Macready was stage-godfather, and something more, for without him they might never have seen the light, or at least the footlights, and that Irving in due course, and as if obeying an acknowledged law, followed Macready as the hero in the two plays, both of which were written with a strange mixture of genius and finery by Bulwer, afterwards first Lord Lytton.

When one remembers that Macready, though what used to be called "a fine figure of a man," had a somewhat rugged and decidedly powerful countenance, and still more, when one looks at the portrait sketch of him, by George Scharf, in the part of Claude Melnotte, it is impossible to suppose that he realised Bulwer's fancy picture of the dreamy, self-conscious, aristocratically inclined gardener's son; though it is easy to imagine that he

infused his own dramatic fire into the telling situations of a play which is sometimes wishy-washy, sometimes grandiloquent, and not infrequently both. One cannot but think that without the unique charm which it is clear Miss Faucit gave to the character of the heroine, in itself not especially fascinating, and without the prestige and the hard work which Macready brought to bear on the production, *The Lady of Lyons* might have failed to make the mark which has endured down to our day. Yet the thought may be mistaken, since the piece certainly does contain good rousing situations, which, if they outrage plausibility and common-sense when considered in cold blood, offer, not the less, striking opportunities to an emotional actor and actress.

It was partly on this account, no doubt, and partly, it may be supposed, because somehow it seemed part of the curriculum, that Irving produced the play at the Lyceum. In a way he was certainly less handicapped as to appearance in the earlier scenes than Macready must have been. He had the true poetic cast of face, and, as he had shown in Hamlet and lesser parts, could so deal with dreams that

they seemed to his audiences the only true realities. But he could not disguise the unmistakable air of intellect which was entirely at variance with the frippery of Claude Melnotte's unscrupulous vapourings. Of course he could have played an intentionally silly part with a silly look throughout. But here the dramatist gave no room for showing the gradations by which Claude is supposed to pass from not very reputable foolishness to wisdom and honour. You cannot play Claude first as a deplorably silly and easily perverted youth and then, quite suddenly, as a man who has won fame and respect; therefore, all the actor can do in the beginning is to dwell as much as possible on Claude's good points, chiefly his devotion to his mother, and to make the ornamentation of the speech describing the fairy palace as plausible as may be. These things Irving did as a fine artist can do them, but one felt that he had a freer hand in the comedy, excellently given, of the scene with Damas, where, of course, it was a distinct advantage to have the accomplished and experienced Walter Lacy as an opponent. And his best moments, those in which the electric

thrill so constant between him and his audiences was most keenly felt, were those of Claude's departure to the war, and those of Claude's return and gradual revelation of himself to Pauline.

Many playgoers will remember the elaboration, never passing into mere extravagant display, which was given to this as it was to all Irving's productions, and will recollect also the minute attention as to accuracy in details of the appointments and the costumes of the time. One of these details had a curious history. Irving frequently talked over plays with my father before their production, and so it was with *The Lady of Lyons*, as to which the actor was naturally curious concerning Macready's method, "business," and so following. One night at supper, while the play was but beginning life, my father, remembering some experiences in France, mentioned casually the differences in tone-quality between the French and the English military drum. Irving displayed a lively interest in this, and asked various questions as to the kind of difference. When *The Lady of Lyons* was produced the drummers preceding the detachment of troops which is

enthusiastically if somewhat irregularly joined by Claude, played on French drums, the peculiar and presaging tone of which certainly added to the effect of a scene artistically and carefully worked up to a climax of excitement.

It was, I think, on the third night of *The Lady of Lyons* that I was in Irving's dressing-room talking over this, that, and the other in connection with the play, when I said to him, "Do you know that in the scene of Claude's return you have a wonderful look, according to all the portraits, of Napoleon in his earlier days?" He waited a moment before saying, "You thought that, did you? Noticed it?" I replied that it had struck me on the first night and that the impression was now confirmed. "Ah!" he said, with his occasional and curious half-shy, half-sly look, "well, if you see no objection you might mention that in what you write about the production." I guessed at once, and I am sure he knew that I guessed, what was in his mind; and, therefore, I was not in the least surprised when he assigned to himself the part of Bonaparte in *Madame Sans-Gêne*, a play produced long after, wherein Miss Ellen Terry, and not the manager, was,

from the nature of the play, the deservedly successful attraction. The skill, however, with which Irving, playing admirably, of course, the less important part of Bonaparte, presented not only the face, which was foreseen, but the figure also of the little Corsican, was a feat well worth noting.

When he was first playing Mephistopheles in Wills's *Faust* I said to him, "I, and no doubt various other people, noted your resemblance at the end of *The Lady of Lyons* to the young Napoleon. Everybody has noticed, as how should they not, your likeness, when you first appear in Faust's study, to Dante." "Yes," he replied, "and, of course, I have noticed it. I have always wanted to appear as Dante himself. But the play? There is the difficulty. Some day I shall overcome it, but I don't see the way yet."

As to how the difficulty was finally attacked there may be more to say presently, but, meanwhile, I have wandered from melodrama in a lofty line as set forth by Bulwer.

Richelieu, as a play, differs entirely from the same author's *The Lady of Lyons*. If the language is at times overstrained, it always helps

on the movement of which the drama is full. In the first published version of the play the plot devised by the conspirators, the nature of the missing papers, and the means by which the conspiracy was overthrown in the nick of time, are all made clear enough. But the scenes conveying this lucid information had to be curtailed or cut, and as time went on more and more cuts were made until, as the play is given now, the spectator must imagine as best he can for himself why so much depends on François gaining possession of a mysterious packet containing things unknown to the audience, and how the persevering François manages to put this packet in the Cardinal's hands at the right dramatic moment. Not that it matters very much; it is enough to see the patriotic and magnetic figure of Richelieu struggling against and finally trampling down a conspiracy with the details of which we really need not trouble ourselves. Then the underplot of the loves of Mauprat and Julie is daintily contrived, and is artfully connected with the main interest. Altogether it is in no way surprising that actors of the highest rank should, ever since the play's pro-

duction, have been glad to find an occasion for appearing as its central personage.

Looking back upon Irving's appearance as Richelieu I find, in remembering his first and his later performances of the character, another striking instance of his always growing mastery over his art in technical science, in the just proportioning of his means to the carrying out of the impression he intended to convey. In his first essay, under the Bateman management, there was a decided inclination to overstraining of voice and of gesture when great efforts were to be compassed, insomuch that there was a danger, in moments of deep emotion, of extravagance taking the place of dominating strength. Partly this arose from a desire to indicate the victory of a mighty volition over an enfeebled frame, a desire whereof the accomplishment presented great difficulties. These were not fully overcome until the revival of the play during Irving's management of the Lyceum. Then he overleaped the obstacles which had previously obstructed the way to a complete expression of his meaning, and, to take one instance, the launching of the

curse of Rome was a complete display of an overmastering force without a hint of violence. On both occasions, I think, and certainly on the later one, he had his dressing-room hung with small and excellent copies of the best-known portraits of Richelieu within easy sight of his dressing-table, as *mutatis mutandis* was the case when he played Charles I.

It was interesting to compare his second Richelieu with the rendering of the same part by Edwin Booth, who played it at the Princess's under many disadvantages, but with consummate power and art. I think the most notable difference between the two was that the American's very impressive performance had in it less relief than was the case with Irving, who, admirable comedian as he was, gave their full importance to the passages where something of the gay humour which Richelieu must have had in his youth peers out. Booth's smile and tone in such passages were those of a melancholic personage; they had a distinct charm, but it was not the charm given, as with Irving, by any real lightening of spirit. I gained the impression from the characters which Booth

played during his visit to England, that, as for mirth, where he excelled was in showing its simulation rather than its reality. Thus the mirth of his Iago was consistently and persistently sardonic, though assumed with such an air of blunt goodwill that one could well understand his dupes being taken in by him. When he played Bertuccio in *The Fool's Revenge*, his pretence of merriment to hide a tortured heart was terribly poignant; and even more might be said of the heart-stirring expression he gave to the distraught humours of King Lear.

In this character, again, it was a matter of much interest to note the different methods of the two actors. Irving, knowing how greatly I admired Booth's Lear, asked me various questions about it when he himself was about to play the part. I told him, among other things, that I had been deeply moved by Booth's delivery of the half-dozen words, "O fool, I shall go mad." He asked me to describe it, and I replied that the pathos and the tragedy of the thing could not be conveyed, but that the despairing tone was very quiet, and that the action—that of dropping

the wearied head on the Fool's shoulder—was very simple. He thought for a moment, and then said, "No, no, no! Never do, never do!" It certainly would not have fitted in any way to his reading of Lear, where, as in some other characters, he was inclined generally to an active expression of emotion where Booth leant rather, when it could fitly be expressed, to a lodged melancholy. His own Lear, as to which a strange story has been already recounted, was in many of its scenes a magnificent and a thrilling performance, at its greatest moments even too poignant. In which connection he told me one night that he had been thinking of taking the play off very soon. I counselled him to carry out the intention, saying that King Lear was not, and never would be, a play to run every night. "Ah! Too painful you mean," he said, "so I think too. And so the audiences think." I answered that I certainly had meant that, but I had in mind also the terrible strain it put upon him. "Well," he said, "you know I have never let that count."

He certainly never had; and it is as natural as it is idle to wish that this had been otherwise.

CHAPTER X

In another and very different great Shakespearean part, Richard III., Irving appeared far less frequently than either his audiences or he himself would have wished. There seemed, indeed, to be a touch of malignity in the fate which intervened in the shape of an injured knee-cap to cut short, after one night, the reproduction of a performance which years before had won, deservedly, golden opinions.

Irving's Richard III. was doubtless among the most perfectly balanced, the most flawless in execution, of his greatest impersonations. And it was one in which he took special delight. He had in one sense a freer hand than usual, that is, he was presenting practically for the first time since Shakespeare's days an unadulterated or, if one may coin the word, uncibberised Richard. No critic professed or amateur could dwell with imaginative rapture on how much more forcibly Edmund Kean or Macready must have delivered such speeches

as "Off with his head, so much for Buckingham!" since the speeches were at last put in their appointed place, never, let us hope, to emerge again. While as for dress and demeanour, Lyceum audiences certainly did not expect the Skelton-like costume and the unmasked intimation of villainy that had become entwined with the traditions of the part. I well remember with what unaffected glee Irving told me of his intention to do away with the ancient bogey of the Duke of Gloucester, and of the special ways in which enough but by no means too much of deviation from the figure of "a marvellous proper man" would be indicated. I remember also conversations at my father's house when historical and Shakespearean aspects of the character were discussed in a way which was vastly interesting then but might seem dry enough in repetition. He took immense pains in searching for anything that might illuminate the matter, and his enjoyment of the work was intense. Not that this was a special characteristic of his study for this particular part. Years afterwards I found him with a printed form, which he had evidently just filled in

with writing, before him. "A new question from *Who's Who*," he said—"one's favourite recreation. I have filled it in *acting*, and I think you'll agree with me that's the only answer." There was certainly no doubt as to agreement, but it made one look back and reflect how absolute his care for and devotion to his art had always been, and conclude that without that absorption even his innate genius would never have forced (that was for long the only word) its way to the topmost height which at last he held unquestioned.

In the case of "the crook-back" the success attained by art, thought, and genius combined, was beyond doubt or cavil. Here was a Plantagenet just warped enough in body to account for an unordered though brilliant intellect, yet so gay, princely, fascinating in address and bearing that, while one heard and saw the incredible scene of the Lady Anne's courtship, one was cajoled into believing it, for the moment, to be not only possible but actual. His hypocrisy was polished and perfect: in the scene with the Churchmen the audience was let into the secret just enough to appreciate how completely the interlocutors

were befooled; his speech was at need persuasive and honeyed, and at another need, as in the "I am not in the vein" scene with Buckingham, cold and biting as a sword-thrust; his ambition and his daring were measureless; the glamour of his personality and his desperate courage in the final scene captured sympathy from judgment. Here, in short, was Shakespeare's, if not history's, Gloucester, in his habit as he lived, a creature of unscrupulous yet royal strength, without a touch of exaggeration or rant. That the character did not pass into his repertory was a loss to his audiences, and I am pretty sure to himself.

There was so large an infusion of mere melodrama in the pre-Irving or cibberised version of *Richard* that the mention of Richard may, without irreverence, serve for a bridge between *Richelieu* and a melodrama of a less distinguished cast, *Louis XI.*, in which only one London favourite, Charles Kean, had preceded Irving. According to the late John Coleman, who had the story from Fechter, Kean and Webster were at daggers drawn as to which of the two should first secure and

produce an English version of Delavigne's clever and telling play, and Kean succeeded in being first in the field. That the part, with its strange grim humour, its curious contrasts and transitions, and the weird ghastly impressiveness of the scene of terror and of the final scene, should attract Irving was natural enough. The success of the undertaking was practically a foregone conclusion. But not the less Irving, according to his wont, devoted infinite pains to study of the character. As was said by a learned and accomplished French critic, M. Jules Claretie, later, for many years and at the moment while I write, Director of the Comédie Française, "Before playing Louis XI. Mr. Irving studied Commines, Victor Hugo, Walter Scott, and all who have written of the middle-class and avaricious king who wore out the elbows of his woollen doublet on the tables of his gossips, the skin-dressers and shoemakers." There was an odd sequel to my own criticism at the time on Irving's Louis XI., which, in truth, offered mighty few points for adverse criticism. My account of the performance appeared in the *Saturday Review*, and, on the following Monday, I went as usual to

call on my then chief, the always considerate and delightful Philip Harwood. After he had discussed the business of the paper for that week, he handed me a letter saying, "Here is something that will interest you." It was a communication from a worthy playgoer who protested vigorously, vehemently, indignantly that he had seen Charles Kean in Louis XI., and that Kean had played the scene of terror on the very same lines which the *Saturday* had noted with approval in Irving's performance. "But," I said, as I gave the letter back to my chief, "I never said that Charles Kean did not do so," and "Quite so" said Harwood, with a quiet smile, as he put the letter back on his table. Next time Irving and I met I recounted the incident to him as a curiosity and he said, "Yes, it is curious, isn't it? No actor of any intelligence could play that scene in any other way; yet it seemed an offence to Charles Kean's admirer that I should interpret it in the same, the only possible, way! A very strange art to pursue, the actor's, and very strange, sometimes, the ways of expert and lay critics."

There was another melodrama from the

French, a real boulevard melodrama, in which Charles Kean had been famous and which Irving at one time thought of producing—*Pauline*. Of this I made a new version for Irving, bringing the action up to a date far more modern than that of the original. In the course of working at it I had the idea of giving at least a hint of a sympathetic touch to the principal figure, and communicated this idea to Irving. He damped my desire to humanise the villain at once. "No," he said, "a very natural idea, but it won't do. He must be an out-and-outer." In this he certainly showed the judgment which so seldom failed him. He showed it yet more in completely shelving the play. For an English version, unless it had gone right away from the original, keeping only the central idea, common enough in fiction and drama, of a secret villain and bandit who, to the world and even to his wife, seemed to be a wealthy man of birth, breeding, and charm, could not possibly have appealed to the audiences whose taste had been nurtured by Irving's care and education. The last phrase is not, I think, too strong for use; and this seems a fitting place for recording an incident

which, by date, belongs to a very much later period. It was after his return from one of his last tours that I went to see him in the afternoon. While we were talking, his brougham —a luxury which he had long refused to adopt and to which he gave in only from necessity— was announced, and he begged me to come with him as far as might be on the way to the Lyceum. After we had got in he sat for some little time silent and thinking. Presently he said: "You were speaking just now of the very right desire for an endowed theatre, and of the schemes for it which people, who have the thing at heart, from time to time propose. Well, there is, now, one such theatre in London; but I say *now* advisedly." For a moment I paused to catch his meaning and he went on— "The Lyceum is an endowed theatre. I make a great deal of money by these tours, in the Provinces, in America, might perhaps make as much or more in Australia some day. What becomes of it all? You know how much or how little goes in personal expense. Where do the big sums go? Into the Lyceum Theatre, into my desire to make it what I doubt if the State will ever make any theatre, a play-house

endowed as the best Continental State Theatres are endowed, but naturally free from their inevitable disadvantages."

One thinks of this; and one thinks of the story feelingly and quietly told by Mr. Bram Stoker in his "Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving," of the too swift succession of heavy blows, beginning with the destruction by fire of the irreplaceable repertory scenery, which fell upon the great actor and great enthusiast for the drama, and one but can say, "The pity of it, the pity of it."

To recur to melodrama, there was one boulevard play in which he made but a short appearance—*Robert Macaire*—which is worth mention for one or two reasons. He played it at the Lyceum, first for an afternoon benefit performance, with his constant and beloved friend, J. L. Toole, as Jacques Strop; and afterwards it was put into the evening programme, when Mr. Weedon Grossmith, then an excellent rising, and now an excellent risen, comedian, took Mr. Toole's place. Irving's Macaire was, first and last, a brilliant piece of extravagant foppery assumed by a reckless brigand and probable cut-throat, with a touch of true melodrama

bordering close on tragedy at the conclusion. At the first Lyceum performance I happened to meet Palgrave Simpson in the corridor and was moved to ask him—one would scarce have thought twice before asking him if he had seen Garrick—if he had seen Lemaître in the part, and what he thought of Irving by comparison. "Oh! yes," he replied, "I saw Frédérick and remember it as vividly as possible; and I think Irving's a decidedly better performance; finer, better put together, more impressive." Now Palgrave Simpson was not in the same case with Herman Merivale, who went to a theatre in Paris, surprised and attracted by Frédérick's name on the playbill, saw the one scene in which Lemaître appeared, and was so surprised in another sense that he turned to his neighbour and asked if the actor in the scene just ended was really Frédérick. "*Hélas! Oui, monsieur*," was the answer. "*Voilà ce qui en reste.*" But Palgrave Simpson had seen the great Frédérick, for great he undoubtedly was in some ways and in certain parts, before his powers had waned. Therefore his opinion seems worth recording. All the more worth recording because, when all is said and done,

Macaire was, by a chance happy for Frédérick but far happier for the authors of *L'Auberge des Adrets*, Lemaître's creation, a part invented by the actor almost exactly as, in later days, Lord Dundreary was invented by Sothern. These individual and meteoric products of one actor's brain are as a rule best left alone by later players. That Irving by his own striking individuality re-galvanised Macaire might wisely be regarded as an exception to prove a rule.

CHAPTER XI

I HAVE not in these pages attempted to discuss or even to mention anything like the full tale of Irving's noteworthy impersonations at the Lyceum; have touched, indeed, only on those wherein there seemed room for some special comment, or with which special associations might be recorded. The plays of Lord Tennyson, however, had a unique interest by their authorship alone, to leave other reasons aside. In *Queen Mary*, produced under Mrs. Bateman's management with excellent care and taste, Irving appeared in the brief and, so far as reading the play is concerned, not strikingly dramatic character of King Philip. He, however, informed the poet's masterly sketch of the Spaniard's chief attributes with his own dramatic genius so that it produced a striking and lasting impression, which was admirably seized and preserved on canvas by Whistler in his well-known portrait. It was during the run of this play that Irving first

received an invitation to the Royal Academy dinner. I heard of this through his saying to me: "Don't come to the theatre on such-and-such a night, unless you want to see somebody else as Philip. I have been asked to the Royal Academy dinner, and that is an honour that really must be accepted. There will be no difficulty about filling the part for that night."

In *The Cup*, produced with great success under his own management, Irving had a part, Synorix, which was not grateful in any sense and did not suit him particularly well. He played it, of course, with the spirit of a thorough artist, but his great part on this occasion was that of manager, stage-manager, general director — what else not? Mr. Bram Stoker has told us how he sought out the opinions of the most learned antiquarian authorities, and how he himself actually devised a ritual for the priests in the Temple of Artemis to follow in the action of the scene. His care for effectiveness combined with correctness, so far as it could possibly be obtained, was to be noted further in the choice of the dogs figuring in the scene where Sinnatus is

a-hunting. By an odd chance their daily walks and mine frequently met at a particular point, and, always stopping to say a word to them and their keeper, I was constantly struck by the Etruscan-vase kind of look which they presented even off the stage, whereon their appearance was impressive and entirely in harmony with the excellently devised scene and costumes.

The mention of these dogs leads excusably to a digression concerning the dogs that were Irving's companions at home and in his dressing-room at the theatre. Of one—I think it was the terrier Charley—a remarkable story has been not infrequently told. How, when Irving and his company were going on a tour in America, Charley was to go with them, but got as far only as Southampton, where somehow he missed the boat. There were grievings, telegrams, anxieties until at New York came the welcome news that Charley had appeared at the stage-door of the Lyceum, woefully travel-stained and emaciated, some four days after he had been missed at Southampton. It was a pathetic and striking illustration of the sense now forgotten by human beings and

reserved by some domestic animals, and especially dogs; and it had the advantage of being true. There was, however, one small piece of explanation which Irving gave to me when I asked him as to the correctness of the history. This was that on a previous occasion Charley had got lost somewhere on the way to Southampton, and had followed the railway line back towards London for some distance until he arrived at a station where he was known and identified and cared for. The explanation, it will be seen, is but partial; for instance, it does not account for the dog following the line on a back track on the first occasion, and it in no way lessens the remarkable nature of the incident.

Both Charley and Fussy, another favourite terrier, were each in his own day frequent guests of ours in the times when Irving was able to join us at a quiet supper after the play; and both, it is pleasant to remember, were as courteous and well-bred as befitted their position. His influence over animals was strictly analogous to that which he had on human beings, among those of whom who really knew him, it would have been strange

to find one who did not fully reciprocate his own constancy in friendship, while mere acquaintances mostly felt the same magnetic attraction which was a bond between him and his audiences. One night when he was but just back from an American tour I went to see him at the Lyceum. I was before my time, and, having waited a while in his dressing-room, went down to the wing where I knew he would come off the stage. When he did so we exchanged greetings and went up the stairs to his room, and on the way he gave a peculiar whistle, which excited my curiosity. We sat down and had hardly begun to talk when a very attractive cat entered, and leapt on the table close to Irving, purring all it could and begging for attention, which was readily given. Irving's face had lighted up with a pleased smile at the first sight of the cat, and "You heard me whistle as we came up," he said; "that was my old signal to her before this last tour. She belongs to the theatre, and we became great friends. But it's a long time since we met, I hoped she would remember the whistle and me, but I couldn't be sure. Well," he continued, with his absolutely un-

affected air and tone of joyousness, "she has remembered." There was another touch, in this matter, of his never-failing simplicity and youth of heart. He had told me that the cat, though hostile to no one, was by no means prodigal of its attentions to any individual. Presently, when it had been made much of to its heart's content by the old friend whose chiefship it seemed to acknowledge, the cat came over to me and made the overtures of friendship which all cat-lovers know. "Why," Irving cried, with a tone of some disappointment, "she's beginning to take to you!" I reminded him that I was thoroughly accustomed to cats, and knew their ways as well as a man can. "To be sure," he said, with an air of relief; "of course, there's a great deal in knowing how to touch them so that they won't be startled. Of course that's it."

But to leave this divagation and return to the Tennysonian dramas. Of the three in which Irving took part *Becket* was incomparably the highest and greatest in thought and form. As a dramatic poem, without reference to the shape given to it for stage purposes, it rises to an elevation which enables me, as

I look back, to appreciate more than I did, though I may not even now endorse, the exalted estimation to which on one occasion Irving gave full utterance.

He had been in love with the play, as with the character, of *Becket* from the first moment of considering its possibilities for his stage. He had been given by Tennyson, a poet whose true nature was as trustful, when once trust was given, and confiding as the actor's own, an absolutely free hand in adaptation to stage purposes. He had accomplished the remarkable feat of making *Becket*, at any rate with himself as the chief figure, an excellent acting play which still retained the most striking beauties of the original text. He had been doubtful as to the public's verdict; and he had found that the venture was absolutely and entirely successful. Yet for none of these things did he take any credit to himself; his one thought was of delight in that he had been able to interpret a work for which he had the deepest admiration in such a way that it reached the minds and hearts of his audiences.

The occasion to which I have referred was

one of the small and more intimate suppers in the "Beefsteak Room" after the curtain had fallen at the Lyceum, when *Becket* had been running for so short a time that it was naturally a subject for conversation. Irving was sympathetically and generously enthusiastic over Tennyson's work, and, referring to the beautiful lines beginning, "There was a little fair-hair'd Norman maid"—a speech which he always delivered as one rapt in it—he expressed a strong doubt if there was anything in Shakespeare to be preferred to it.

Now, while I will yield to no one in admiration for Tennyson's greatest achievements, yet I hold Shakespeare in dearer reverence, and startled, as I might be now, by such a deliverance from such a source, I was then young enough to be in the act of beginning a protest when I felt a light, meaning touch on my arm, and, looking round, faced one of Irving's most trusted and confidential marshals, who said to me, "Don't. Of course I understand your impulse, but you don't know how he feels about it." Naturally I left my intended protest unuttered, and truly I did not know or suspect at the time how Irving felt about *Becket*. I

learnt later, as must be told in the last pages of a volume now nearing its end. And when the learning came to me, in due course, I was more than grateful for that kindly and warning pressure of the arm.

CHAPTER XII

BETWEEN the production of *Madame Sans-Gêne* at the Lyceum under Irving's management and that of *Dante* at Drury Lane, I lost sight, from force of circumstance, to a great extent of Irving, though I am happy to remember that we never lost sympathy or touch with each other. A friendship which was indestructible had its outward assertion in letters and telegrams — the telegrams mostly from him, who had the art of putting into a telegram more of meaning than many people put into a letter.

The time during which we practically never met, was full to me of thoughts and memories —memories, apart from intimate meetings, of private and semi-private functions. Many people will remember the Aladdin-like banquets which he used to give on special occasions under a marquee erected on the stage of the Lyceum after the play had ended. How it was done is still a marvel; it could not have been accomplished by any one who had not a genius

for organisation and control. The danger of fire alone would have daunted many courageous people. I spoke to him once of this, and he replied, "Of course you don't suppose I have left that out of sight. But you can't know all the precautions taken," and then he told me of some which alone would have been enough to reassure the most timid. And if the marquee itself had suddenly come crashing down I feel sure it would have been a case not of *impavidum* but of *impavidos ferient ruinæ*. His presence and demeanour would have reassured all who were tempted to panic, while his quiet commands would have brought order from chaos.

Another remarkable quality of his—tact—was occasionally demanded, and was always ready at such entertainments. Never, perhaps, more so than when at a function celebrating the success of *The Merchant of Venice*, one of the most brilliant of after-dinner speakers turned what began like a sparkling speech on conventional lines into a rather acrid criticism of Irving's reading of Shylock. Every one wondered how the actor, when it fell to him to follow this speech with one of his own, would get out

of the obvious difficulty. He did get out of it without saying a word that could show any resentment of the previous speech, or a word that could be construed as an apology for his own view of Shylock. The same quality of tact was notable at a smaller gathering in the "Beefsteak Room," when the special guest of the night was Mr. Cody, "Buffalo Bill," whom Irving had met and liked in America, and to whom he wished to show special attention in England. Among the other guests was one so rightly appreciated for conversational as for other powers that he was accustomed to have "the table to himself" when he launched out on congenial topics. Now Irving's chief desire was to give Cody, then a very modest relater of his own exploits, a "lead-over" to saying something, however reluctantly, as to his deeds in scouting. More than once Irving tried to turn the current of talk in an unobtrusive way; but at last he felt that there was a knot to be cut, and he gained his object with a skill of double compliment which could not but please both the people chiefly concerned, and which gave the rest of the company the pleasure of hearing from Mr. Cody

the simplest, and therefore most effective, recital of his since famous duel with a Red Indian chief. One might fill pages with instances of Irving's ready tact, a quality which is not invariably, but in his case most assuredly was, allied with the best and truest kindliness.

I have referred in a previous passage to the sardonic humour which he could use at will for stage purposes, and which was seldom visible in private life. He could be sarcastic enough or dominating enough when domination or sarcasm was needed; but gentleness, with no touch of insipidity, was his habitual mood; and I remember that, before he had begun to be what is now called elderly, he said to me, speaking of a person known to both of us, "Perhaps much less in the wrong than we are at first inclined to think. I find, and I daresay you find, that as one grows older one grows gentler in judgment of others."

The only shade of a shadow of difference between us made its faint outline some time before this, and it arose from my taking huff at some fancied slight, and writing to convey a sense of huffiness. The answer, giving in few words a complete explanation, ended with

"I hope to see you at the theatre to-morrow night. And drop, old fellow, the *Saturday Review* sarcasm when you write to your old friend, Henry Irving."

As in human affairs, his judgment in literature was at once catholic and considered. He had on occasions the conviction and the courage of a heretic. One night at my father's house the subject of Otway's tragedy, *Venice Preserved*, came up in talk.

There were some who cried down the antiquated quality of the play: Irving spoke eloquently in defence of its beauties, and, finding that there was a copy of it easily accessible in the house, proceeded to read from it a passage which was a favourite with him, and which certainly showed the perhaps too-forgotten Otway at his best. Yet I thought then, as I do now, that Irving read more into it, in a double sense, than one might perceive in quiet perusal. At the time he had a transient thought of reviving the play, but this, for good or for ill, was afterwards abandoned.

When, on the production of *Dante* at his first Drury Lane season, we met, after a long interval of personal separation, he greeted me—

and is there any surer touch of sympathy—as if resuming a conversation. "I need not ask you," he said, "for your opinion of the play. With all respect to the author, it is not a play for English audiences. And its lack of cohesion gives me double and treble work. I can never for a moment take my hands off the reins."

Yet, fully feeling this, he had such an admiration for Sardou's just fame that, as he then told me, he intended to take *Dante* as his one and only equipment on his forthcoming American tour.

Dante, admirably translated by Mr. Laurence Irving, had a great success at Drury Lane, where Irving was received as a most honoured guest; but it was, in truth, a success achieved by the actor in the teeth of the author, and American audiences displayed, I cannot but think, a true critical sense in showing quickly their opinion that a better vehicle for Irving's conception of Dante's personality might have been found. It was, in bald truth, a desperately tedious play, overladen with absolutely inconsequent characters and situations at such length and to such an extent that I do not believe

anything short of Irving's determination and dominance could have carried it to the success which it obtained in London. So far as he and students of dramatic art were concerned, it had a particular value in showing the results of his constant study. His Dante was an impressive and living figure wherein was no restlessness either of speech or of gesture.

It was, however, in his last appearances, again at Drury Lane, in London, that the stride he had made in mastery over his art was most noticeable. In the part of Shylock, to take one instance, he had a new and commanding tranquillity, and in the great scene with Tubal, where there had been in old days some sense that the actor was obtaining effect at the expense of art, there was now a secured, and for that more masterful, rendering of the bewilderingly changing emotions. In short, strength had completely taken the place of violence.

But the greatest, and not perhaps the most obvious, change was to be seen in his playing of *Becket*. The part was one in which he had from the first shown a fine restraint, but this was now much more marked than before.

The quiet commanding figure of the great Churchman seemed to fill and hold the whole theatre. The very stillness of repressed passion had a more compelling effect than any outburst of emotion could have given.

As regards *Becket*, I have said before that the play and the part had a strange influence over Irving. It was not to me, but to my wife, that he once said that no dramatic poetry and no character had ever so influenced him. And when asked if this excluded older and greater names he reiterated his faith. "You know," my wife said, "that people talk of your having 'made' the play." His reply was emphatic. "No, no," he said, "the play made me. It changed my whole view of life."

The last time we saw Henry Irving was in our little country garden. Walter Collinson, his constant and devoted personal attendant, had come over two days before from Farnham to prepare us for a visit from him, and yet he took us quietly by surprise, finding his way as if by instinct to the garden, which he had never seen, where we were, instead of making his arrival known at the door. For a long time we sat quietly there, talking over old

times and recent changes. He was rather subdued, but charming as ever, with flashes of his old humour in face and voice, as when he had a momentary difficulty with the spring of his pocket match-box. Thereon I lighted and handed to him a "flaming vesta" for his cigar. It proved, however, more of an embarrassment than of a help; and "I don't understand these fireworks," he said, with a smile, as he dropped the little torch, and then wrestled again, successfully, with his own match-box.

Presently he carried us off to "The Swan," at Alton, to dinner. It is by no means always the case that the joy of old times can be successfully reproduced. No sooner, however, had we sat down to dinner, luckily served in a room full of really old fittings such as he delighted in, than, as if by a motion of Prospero's staff, he called up from the past, without a change, one of our old meetings of three in the days when he used to come back to our house in London after the theatre. Without a sign of effort he became, as of yore, animated, joyous, full of reminiscence, anecdote, good-humoured mimicry. The ball

of conversation never hung doubtful, and never rolled more smoothly and delightfully. He was to have stayed the night at the hotel, and gone for a drive with us the next morning. Some business, however, connected with his company, for whose welfare he was ever solicitous, took him back to London that night. We saw him to the station, and as we drove away he was standing erect and framed, an impressive figure, in the doorway, waving us a good-bye. As we went home my wife and I could not but agree, with misgiving, that there had been a strange note of presage in his last-spoken farewell. Strange? Not so maybe, for the men of poetry and power have a vision clearer than that given to the most of mortals.

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